

Language and Meaning from The Marvel Universe in Creating an Inclusive Fan Culture

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The marketing strategy of the first two decades of Marvel Comics, delivered to its reading audience in large part through the pen of writer/editor/publisher Stan Lee, made a concerted effort to sound inclusive. Lee's goal was to make each reader feel part of a greater whole. That greater whole was an amorphous group that can be called "Marveldom Assembled." Through various fan club-type organizations, Marvel readers could become official members. The membership was in various clubs, but "Marveldom Assembled" was an imaginal group, as actual people gathered together to celebrate Marvel Comics were rarely assembled for real in the 1960s and 1970s (though this did begin to change during the 1970s at comic book conventions). The strategy was to build identification for the reader with this larger group reading Marvel Comics, though the end goal for Lee and Marvel was to sell more comics.

However, one result for the readers Marvel was attracting, especially younger ones but also including older aged readers (i.e., college age), was indeed to impart positive identification with something bigger, and possibly better, than other groups from their everyday life. Within the activity of reading comics, the language Lee used to sell comics provided an opportunity for such readers to become more positive about themselves as well as more positive about their community. Lee's language and the emotions and actions they suggested, can be seen to be effective in specific examples of readers' language. In letters sent to Marvel Comics

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publications, readers' reactions to Lee's writing show they became invested in more than buying comic book entertainment.

From the very beginning of Marvel Comics, upon the publication of *Fantastic Four #1* in November 1961, the Marvel Universe (i.e., the shared mythology comprised of all the Marvel Comics narratives) was being created. The intent was creation of a narrative experience providing a comic book world that more directly matched the reality of the reader's world than comics that came before them did. When Jack Kirby and Stan Lee put together this first team of Marvel superheroes, they desired to add a realistic perspective not often found: the Fantastic Four was not only a team of superheroes, but also a family. Reed Richards and Sue Storm were on a fast track toward becoming husband and wife; Johnny Storm was Sue's younger brother; Ben Grimm, (aka The Thing), was Reed's associate and best friend. The FF even lived together, which importantly meant that they also squabbled together like any family presumably does. The trend toward realism is what Lee aimed for in his writing. The reputation of the stories of the Marvel Universe was built on their realism, creating an exciting buzz among readers about this new Marvel style of comics.

The trend only gathered steam and more interest with the introduction of The Amazing Spider-Man created by Lee and Steve Ditko. Underneath the costume was Peter Parker, a wisecracking teen-ager whose cheeky lines of dialogue were never more noticeable than while he was fighting a villain. Identification with this young hero occurred with young readers but perhaps even more easily with college students experiencing the cultural changes of the ongoing counter-culture. For them, flippancy toward the old way of doing things was a badge of hipness and authenticity.

Efforts to continue the growth of Marvel Comics were successful, but this did not satisfy Lee. He worked relentlessly to promote Marvel, using his now almost ubiquitous hyperbolic style in both his comic book scripts

and in the marketing column he wrote, “Stan Lee’s Soapbox.” The Soapbox was found on the Marvel Bullpen Bulletins page included in most every Marvel Comic from that era (disappearing for good only in 2001). The Bulletin pages mostly included news about forthcoming comics, but the Soapbox featured Lee’s commentary about a range of comic book topics. As Marvel continued into the 1970s, with other writers taking over the writing of the actual comics (Lee’s last regular writing for Marvel comic books was in 1972), Lee’s focus turned primarily toward marketing. He promoted the comics, but he also displayed a burning desire to place the Marvel comic book characters into films and television programs.

The language of Lee’s efforts stayed remarkably similar in every arena and followed directly from the early days of Marvel. Lee’s stylistic hyperbole attempted to foster a desire in his readership to identify with Marvel in more personal terms than any comic book readers before them. However, the identification with Marvel he also stressed was equal to how other cultural or social institutions wanted people to identify with them. Early on, when the first Marvel fan club (The Merry Marvel Marching Society, from here “MMMS”) was formed, its obvious intent was to build readership, but it also tried to raise those reader’s self-esteem. Stressing identification with a set of principles, ostensibly the principles the superheroes in the comics lived by, Lee attempted to allow readers to see themselves as heroes. Transferring the context of heroism from comic books to a reader’s own life did not make the reader a superhero, but through such identification the possibility existed of making them better human beings. The MMMS, on a record sent to new members, had its own song, *The Merry Marvel Marching Society Theme Song*, with lyrics illustrating how superheroicness is more than battling villains:

Stand a little straighter. Walk a little prouder. Be an innovator.
Clap a little louder. Grow forever greater. We can show you how
to. Where will you be then? You belong, you belong, you belong,

you'll belong, to the Merry Marvel Marching Society. March along, march along, march along to the song of the Merry Marvel Marching Society. If you growl, if you groan with a dour sour outlook, if you howl, if you moan, you can lose your sour grout by keeping trim and in step with the vim and the pep of the Merry Marvel Marching Society. Be an early riser. Strive to be ambitious. Speak a little wiser. Try to be judicious. Be a good advisor, never ever vicious. Where will you be then? Face front...Lift your head...You're on the winning team...NUFF SAID! (The Voices of Marvel)

The lyrics attempt to provide a growing self-confidence for the listener (and comic book reader) through concrete actions – stand straighter, walk prouder – and also tries to identify the attitudes that presumably make up the comic book heroes – ambition, wisdom, judicial reasoning, and lack of vicious tendencies. Just as Peter Parker/Spider-Man needed to learn how great responsibility comes with great power, the readers here were exposed to a creed. The song described the ways to properly carry themselves, but also how to act toward others. By discovering the traits of heroism in their own lives, and then acknowledging that heroism and being proud of it, readers were then encouraged to feel part of a greater whole, The MMMS (or what we can call Marveldom Assembled). Being a member brought demands, but they were positive demands, trying to influence positive actions.

The MMMS lasted till 1969, when it morphed into Marvelmania International (reflecting hopes of expanding the Marvel fan club globally), lasting under this name until 1971. In 1973, another fan club was started, this time named F.O.O.M., standing for “Friends of Ol’ Marvel.” This version was notable for including the self-titled pro-zine, FOOM, a fanzine produced for readers by Marvel Comics professional staff of artists and writers. In addition to the FOOM magazine, members received a membership kit upon joining. This included a membership card, stickers,

and most relevant, a Jim Steranko drawn poster that included a creed written by Stan Lee. The language of this is again hyperbolic, but effectively transmits a message, especially for younger readers:

Stand Tall! Thou Hath Reached The Peak And Plucked The Proudest Prize! Hang Loose! Thou Shalt Flee From Fear No Longer, Nor Suffer Pangs Of Doubt! Face Front! The Past Doth Lie Behind Thee. The Beckoning Future Now Is Thine! 'Tis True! 'Tis True! O, How Proudly We Proclaim: Thou Hath Joined Marveldom Assembled! Thy Name Hath Been Inscribed, Now And Evermore, In The Blessed Book Of FOOM! Come Take Thy Place, Believer, Within The Hallowed Ranks. The Eyes Of FOOM Are Upon Thee. They Behold Thee With Fondness And Favor. The Heart Of FOOM Embraces Thee. The Hands Of FOOM Clasp Thine. For FOOM Hath Summoned Thee, And Claimed Thee For Its Own! Thou Hath Chosen A Creed, A Code, A Way Of Life. And By Thy Choice, And By Thy Faith, The Legends Ne'er Shall Perish! Excelsior!

All this language is directly traceable in the lineage of Lee's writing not only in comic book scripts, but in everything he wrote for Marvel, from editor's notes to Stan's Soapbox commentary.

Read carefully, it attempts to bolster the self-esteem of a reader in multiple ways. First, the reader needs to turn his or her back on doubt and fear, demonstrated by their choice of Marvel Comics. Then, with that choice made, the reader can look to the future and imagine a better life as one of Marveldom Assembled, a group embodying the justice and fair play depicted in the codes of Marvel superheroes in their comic books. Lee's words are over the top, and may seem silly to an adult reading this today. From personal experience, however, I can express these words meant something more important and less silly to an eight year old on whose wall this poster hung for many years. Identifying with "Marvel"

worked at least as far as separating the “Marvel” reader from the “DC” reader in my household, but also in my early conception of the world. The heroic nature of this conception and the responsibility the choice described and demanded was an ideal to live up to, “a way of life,” not simply comic book nonsense.

Though this worked well for helping a younger reader discern what was important in the messages of Marvel Comics, Lee also promoted acceptance on a higher level for his revolutionary comic book superheroes. As evidenced in the *Marvel Bullpen Bulletins*, by the mid- and late 1970s, Lee’s focus continued on college students, as well as academia more broadly. He looked to keep readers as they grew older, but also attempted to attract an acceptance for Marvel Comics as worthy of attention and study. In the March 1978 *Soapbox*, Lee discussed the content of the lectures he gives on college campuses. He lets the monthly comic book readers know his lectures discuss comics in ways that develop a sense of legitimacy about them. He describes his lecture notes, beginning with his history of how Marvel Comics came to be, and in true Stan fashion, “it rarely comes out the same way twice!” (*The Mighty Thor* 28).

A key characteristic of a mythology, including the mythology known as the “Marvel Universe” is that there can be multiple versions of myths. As evidenced by oral tradition, in which myth gets passed along by multiple tellers, though never in exactly the same way twice, myths almost always have multiple versions. Thus, rebooting of comics characters, but also versions of history (such as how Marvel began), are evidence of the creation of mythology. By giving out varied, and sometimes conflicting, histories of Marvel Comics, Lee sowed the seeds of a mythological perspective, not only on his comics, but also for the company itself. Through this process, the Marvel Universe gets created and given additional credence, as mythologizing paradoxically does.

In his lectures, Lee then discusses “the psyches and gestalts” of his costumed heroes. By intentionally dealing with the psychology of the characters, they are imbued with the problems and limitations any real human might have. Referring to his character’s “gestalts” directly suggests Lee hoped his writing would create complex beings with conflicting thoughts and emotions. Readers identify with a variety of possibilities because within them are recognition of possibilities in our own lives. Lee ends his lectures discussing “the philosophy of comics [...] what’s right with them and [...] what’s wrong with them; why Marvel has a [...] flavor all its own [...] and what lies ahead...” which is again hyperbolic, but can also be seen to simply acknowledge the growth of a “Marvel Universe” around these visual narratives. The Marvel Universe contains serious narratives for readers to consider more deeply than non-readers might grant to them. If the Marvel Universe is a mythology, the individual stories are myths.

As examples, there is Howard the Duck, a duck who is trapped in a world he never made. Dr. Don Blake, a disabled physician, able to fathom the secret heights of this world to become, not like a god, but a true god, the God of Thunder. Dr. Strange, a damaged physician, who finds his pride is worthless in the eyes of the All-Seeing Eye of Agamotto. Or Captain America, a World War II soldier, awakened in an America that just does not seem to have learned any lasting lessons about the nature of the world. Stories function as myths if they matter to an individual and have meaning. There should be no doubt these stories have that potential. Lee’s college lectures seemed to be acknowledging the potential for superhero comics to follow in the human traditions of mythtelling, if readers found them relevant to their lives. As we will see, at least some did.

Because Marvel Comics not only survived, but thrived, we know the hyperbole worked, helping readers identify with the Marvel Comics style, as well as the more amorphous Marveldom Assembled. Lee presented a

language of heroism both personal and communal that was entirely analogous to the language of heroism and moral conduct being taught in churches and schools, as well as through neighborhood and familial and cultural interactions. It's possible to argue such hyperbolic language from Lee was even more positive and life affirming than these more acknowledged and assumedly efficacious avenues of moral and civic education, because we do not have to just imagine the effects of Lee's language. The evidence that Lee's marketing strategy did more than simply sell comic books can be found in the letters from readers sent in and published in various comic book letter columns.

Marvel Comics letters pages were rather unique in comparison to similar columns from their major competitor, DC Comics. The Marvel letter columns, "often contained very long letters in which fans praised, criticized, or offered detailed suggestions. Unlike DC editors, who referred to readers as 'them,' the editors of Marvel's letters pages frequently directly addressed their fans, often using the inclusive 'we' or 'us'" (Pustz). Referring to readers as we or us is obviously in line with the strategy we have seen of presuming the readers to be part of the cohesive whole of Marveldom Assembled and differentiated Marvel from the competition. In addition to praise, criticism, and suggestions for the storylines of their favorite characters, the letters also reflected how the readers felt to be part of Marvel. More importantly, they demonstrated how the self-esteem and community values that Lee constantly emphasized had become part of readers' actual perspectives.

Several Marvel editors have come forward to reveal that some printed letters were faked. There is also evidence of favoritism, since certain readers who wrote in regularly – though presumably about interesting topics – were published frequently. But there are other fascinating letters that reveal real lives being positively influenced by an idea that "Marveldom" was more than just a company that sold comics to kids. Fans discussed the expansive ideals that Lee wrote about. Letter writers

also talked about the heroism of the superheroes in the earlier days of Marvel and how they were inspired by them. When kids could still afford to buy comic books with allowance money and the audience for comics had not yet gotten older to demand more mature and “real” action or reactions from increasingly darkening heroes, the language of heroism that Lee sold was part of why comics were being bought.

As comics grew up, we now expect political and a higher order of moral questions to be asked of superheroes, and deservedly so, as the reading audience skews upward in age. However, early Marvel Comics were written for kids and kids of all ages (by which I mean adults who felt a connection to the ideals of superheroism, like justice and fairness). In these comics, the villains were almost always clearly villains (even when presented sympathetically due to uncontrollable and bad circumstance). Readers of any age can benefit from positive storylines and a welcoming identification with a group – whether real or not – that values a positive outlook and decent treatment of their fellows. The letters found in *FOOM* are especially enlightening as evidence for a profound identification with the hyperbolic language that built Marvel and how that language found a deeper resonance with the readers.

One illuminating letter is found in *FOOM #8*, an issue featuring Captain America. When this issue was published, Captain America was developing problems with his heroic persona in light of the political climate of the day, following from the Vietnam era into the problems of Watergate. In the Captain America title comic, Cap decided to give up his iconic American hero character and opted instead to become the Nomad, a wandering hero without a country. The star-spangled, red, white, and blue costume of Captain America seemed a relic of a country that no longer existed. *FOOM* reader Timothy Stoffregen wrote in with his profound reaction, showing how the narratives and characters of Marvel Comics can become relevant to a reader’s life in more serious ways than simply as entertainment:

It is dark outside, and although my room is well illuminated the darkness pervades my soul. I turn to the poster on my wall. The tall man in red, white, and blue stares at me in determination. A feeling of disbelief runs through me: is he really gone?

Marvel doesn't go in for it but I hoped that Captain America #176 would prove an imaginary story. Cap gone. It's hard to believe. The heart of the matter, of course, is the "high government official" who was No. 1 of the Secret Empire. It understandably shook Steve's confidence as similar matters have shaken our confidences. A Soviet newscaster stated that President Nixon's resignation showed the shakiness of democracy. I believe the contrary. A man, a group of men, even an entire administration can be corrupt, but if the system is bad the ideals linger on. Captain America is, was, and always shall be the greatest comic book character in the world because he **does not** represent the government or any specific group other than pure and simple basic ideals of freedom that exist in all men everywhere. It's not that Captain America **should** exist, it's that he **must** exist. Steve Rogers was wrong. He is not a man; he is a living legend and a living symbol. I pity his responsibilities, but I recognize the need for him to take them up.

Captain America's fate rests in the hands of a group of men on Madison Ave. I hope they make the right decision. As for me I sit and wait...I turn from the poster of the tall man in red, white and blue and the dark pervades my soul. The beacon has gone out and it's so very, very dark without it. (7)

The writer's sentiments are a signal that Marvel's hyperbole achieved more than a marketing goal. This reader directly relates the narrative events in the Captain America comic book and the character's mythology

to both real life events and to his personal life. Marveldom Assembled is acknowledged here as being “in the hands of a group of men on Madison Ave,” but the letter serves as input as to what should be done with the character based on the character’s mythos (i.e., history in Marvel Comics) and what Captain America has meant to Marveldom. Without him, “the beacon has gone out” and “darkness pervades” this reader’s soul.

Another perhaps even more personal example of the connection Marvel Comics were able to foster with their readers is demonstrated by the second letter published in *The Human Fly #8* from 1978. *The Human Fly* is a rather unique comic as it was based on a real-life stunt man whose professed mission was to give hope to the sick and disabled. His personal story is one about fighting back into shape after a debilitating accident. His physical stunts were meant to show that one can achieve anything by putting in the hard work while believing recovery to be possible. One can imagine the difficulty writer Bill Mantlo had in writing such a comic. A balancing act is apparent in the nineteen-issue run between the Fly presented as a superhero, but with stories emphasizing that he was *not* a superhero. With very earnest and unique writing, Mantlo’s narratives achieve something different in this comic book.

Readers responded positively, at least those readers whose letters were printed. If the letters were any indication, this comic achieved its goal of empowering and encouraging disabled readers. The following is representative of the sentiments being sent in:

THE HUMAN FLY #5 touched me and brought tears. [...] Cripple. That must be the most ugly word in the English language. Yet, it is a fact that many must deal with everyday of their lives. But not all of us are strong enough to help ourselves, and that is why there is a man like The Human Fly. [...] you have produced a beautiful and moving work of art. [...] I know how it feels to lie in a hospital bed and wonder if the steel in a leg will someday let me stand and run again. I understand how it feels to learn how to walk

all over again. But, when I was going through my therapy there was no Human Fly, not yet at least. (19)

The inclusivity directly promised in the MMMS song and the *FOOM* poster creed were in evidence, if only in a small way, by publishing *The Human Fly* comic. The example such a comic book hero provided to the letter writer is similar to emotions expressed on the comic's letter page in almost every issue. As the comic had only a short run, we can perhaps see evidence that the majority of Marveldom Assembled were not ready for such inclusiveness. However, I think that would be incorrect. The problems with this comic stemmed from being based on a real person, whose real exploits were often mentioned in the editorial notes. This came to a strange culmination when the real stunt man decided to embark on a musical recording career, which the comic had to include somehow. Such a strange development could only erode readers' interest. But Mantlo's writing on this run achieved something rarely seen: superhero stories in which the narratives directly inspired readers.

The personal connection between readers and the Marvel comics they read is evident from the previous two examples of letters sent to Marvel. An objection can easily be raised that this is irrelevant, because Marvel's intent was (and is) only to sell more comics. They wanted readers to identify in these ways only to get them to be long and loyal customers. And the following November 1974 note (accessed in *Thor* #265), may do little to dissuade us from thinking otherwise:

We hate to close on a solemn note, but by now you've been hit with the hard fact that the price of our regular color comics has risen to thirty-five cents [...]. Naturally, we owe you an explanation [...] the answer is already obvious. Ever-spiraling costs; ever-mounting inflation. Once again we've been faced with rising printing. Engraving, and paper prices, and once again we've reached the point where we're forced to make *our* prices reflect

those new costs. We're sorry. [...] Your loyalty and support in the past have made us the number one comic book company, and we appreciate it greatly. Now, we're going to be working all the harder to *keep* that loyalty and support, to produce the very best possible comics available...at any price. And that's a promise, pal.
(28)

However, such a note, if not selfless and pure, at least suggests recognition of Marvel's attempt to build a real devotion rather than simply a moneymaking operation. Most companies do not plainly write, "We're sorry" after a price increase. And here, they are writing to a presumed audience of young teens, if not children. The issue right before the one in which this appeared was 30 cents. In the perspective of a twelve-year old in 1977, if you were able to get a dollar, you could previously buy three comics at 30 cents each. At 35 cents, you would be a nickel short. That could be a problem.

But Marvel's apology for raising prices – by a nickel – was welcomed. The increase was acknowledged and Marvel had their reasons. It seemed more reasonable for the reader to "be an innovator" and find that extra nickel. The entwined comics narratives became more important as you read more comics. Learning about the Marvel Universe also meant learning more about your own world. Economic lessons of the real world, always part of consumerism, were easier to accept if everyone shared in the changes.

In that real world, one of the hallmarks of being a member of Marveldom Assembled could be an attempt to bring others into the fold. By fostering positive connections between readers, it became natural for them to want to increase the group. And Marvel comic books, with their mission to bring more reality, humanity, and personal emotion into comics, have often been used to try and change the outsiders' views. Those who have not yet "Assembled" were not aware that comics were more than just action tales for young boys. Thus, in *FOOM* #6 from

summer of 1974 we find this letter in “The Voice of Foom!” column, written by one Sari Bitticks:

Dear Foom Folk, I started reading Marvel some years ago in college and have been a steady fan. I am now employed as a youth worker and Director of Christian Education at a large church here in Worcester. I have found the comics to be of great aid in my work. As a specific example, the set of Spideys dealing with the death of Gwen Stacy were very useful in approaching the whole concept of death and grief. I am convinced that several young people were greatly helped by these episodes. Also, Harry Osborne’s encounters with drugs have been well planned and a good basis for beginning discussion. I have also used DD’s blindness and Don Blake’s lameness as starting points for conversations on handicaps, both for normal and handicapped children. Unfortunately, most people are still laboring under the misconception that all comics are poorly written, grammatical nightmares dealing with escapist themes. I, myself, have been reprimanded for dispensing comics and using them in my work. It has gotten to the point where I am forced to defend my opinions by addressing the congregation on the importance of the comic in today’s society. Perhaps FOOM can do all of us fans a favor by doing an article, or better yet, a series of articles dealing with the theme of the value of comics. Such facts as the use of comics for remedial reading programs and other educational purposes could be brought out. Quotes from psychologists, educators and teachers who advocate the use of comics would be of great interest to Foomers. I, for one, am tired of store clerks who make comments when I buy my Marvels. Those of us who enjoy your work and who depend on it for many reasons would appreciate some facts to back up our arguments. I think Foom Magazine would be an ideal place for such assistance. Keep up the good work! Excelsior! (28)

The letter writer is a woman and she is talking about using Marvel Comics to help in her teaching capacity at a Christian church. Though today the group “comics readers” is generally assumed to draw from every possible demographic, in 1974 the assumption was that superhero comics were for boys, even if that was demonstrably not completely correct. Even bolder is her attempt to use Marvel Comics to explore real world issues of death, pain, and disablement, issues churches presumably specialized in.

Though the language of selling the Marvel Universe to readers was often on a personal level, the readers’ intent when buying in to such language was to try and aid others (as superheroes do). For this letter writer, defending the comics of Marvel – to both church members and store clerks – was more important than giving in to common opinion. She did not want to give up reading them or hide the fact that she read them.

The mark of the superhero is not just the ability to change the world, but the need and desire to do so. In these earlier comics, written by Lee in a style passed to other writers, the intent of the superhero was never in doubt. There was less reality (i.e., looking at how someone with superpowers would act in the real world) and more expectation that heroes would do the right thing and act like heroes. Not doing so, famously as in Spider-Man’s case, leads to tragedy, so this was an era when heroes were heroes. Little discussion over why they might not be was taking place. It is worth noting that the writer here, obviously invested in the comics and presumably a member of “Marveldom Assembled” is asking for aid in how best to convince others of the value of this work.

Being one of the Assembled could be a tricky proposition in the real world. In today’s entertainment culture, where superhero films drive the economic engine of Hollywood, discussing comic books and superheroes in public is normal. The stigmatization of being a comic book reader that drove the angst of many a teen reader of comics in the 1970s (and probably all eras) is mostly forgotten. But such a stigma was uncalled for and the readership that was Marvel’s audience often proved to be more

forgiving and more empathetic than the outside world. Lee's language of inclusiveness directly translated to the reader's and some of them became the next generation of Marvel comic book writers.

In evidence, there is a letter published in *FOOM* #18. Ellen McMicking from Ontario, Canada, asked questions about the new X-Men team. Addressing the writer of the comic, Chris Claremont, she ends with a broader question: "Why does it seem that people like you and I (who can sympathize/empathize with our band of Homo Superior heroes) are so few and far between, while the narrow-minded bigot is so painfully common?" (18). Such a reader, with such a question, was not found published in many comics, but the new X-Men had a growing number of readers with sympathy and empathy for the new team of misfit mutants. Many women were openly reading the comic and it represented the beginning of a change in how comic book reading would be judged in the world.

However, even more extraordinary than the letter writer and her question is Claremont's response, unlike anything in comics at the time. For me as a youth of 11, this was unlike anything I heard anywhere else either, including in school or in church. Only from the words that created *Marveldom Assembled* did such a clear message of inclusivity, including the goals and problems with achieving it, appear. Claremont replied, in full:

Why are there people in the United States who think Adolf Hitler was the greatest man who ever lived and regret the fact that he never got a chance to finish what he started? Why do people love dogs and cats and hate niggers? Or wops? Or dagos? Or spics? Or kikes? Or wogs? Or honkies? Or *anyone*, as characters and as people; I would really flip if, one day, I woke up to discover that the men (note: the X-Men) were "real" people. I would love to meet them. By the same token, I like most people. I don't think of myself as any sort of racist; I guess that makes me a liberal. But, at the same time, I'll find myself on the street in New York and – out

of the blue – something happening around me will provoke a racist thought. A thought is as far as the event gets, but maybe that’s enough. Maybe I’ve been fooling myself all these years and I’m really a closet bigot. Or maybe I’m just human and nobody but a canonized saint should expect themselves to feel, act, think the straight-and-narrow every instant of every day. Then again, maybe the difference lies in the fact that a bigot would think that racist thought and follow through with it, thought becoming action, whereas a non-bigot thinks the same flash-response thought and immediately realizes that it’s bullshit, that it has its origin in the psychic framework of a society that’s only just *beginning* to come to terms with the racist elements of its heritage. I honest-to-God don’t know.

What it comes down to is that Dave Cockrum and I view our characters as people, not as black, white, Asians, Irish, African, Amerindian, German, Canadian, Russian, human, mutant, or *whatever!* People – first, last and always – in the probably vain hope that, sooner or later, everyone else in this screwed-up world of ours will start seeing things the same way. (18)

Though I have not looked for direct evidence, I feel comfortable in suggesting that not even a “canonized saint” would ever have said something like this. Its direct suggestion to use the narratives and characters in the X-Men comics to view the real world in a non-discriminatory way is a modern possibility, probably avoided or at least rare for even the official saints of history.

Based only on the evidence of letters from readers, and the occasional editorial written reply, officially selected and published in Marvel comics and here in *FOOM*, it would seem the hyperbolic language of Lee, exhorting the reader of Marvel Comics to stand tall and be part of a group that also stood tall, worked. Some letters, as we now know, were

faked. However, the majority of letters are specific, imparting the ring of authenticity. One might argue that we cannot be sure though. Are the published letters really representative of every reader? Obviously not, but the argument is whether Lee's language, and Marvel's in general, affected anyone in positive ways we might assume such comics could not. I think we can affirm a positive effect could be the outcome of identifying closely with the narrative myths of the Marvel Universe.

And is Marvel unique to such thoughtful or emotional identification? There probably was similar identification taking place with readers of DC Comics, though there may be different reasons for this. DC had a longer history and such iconic characters as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. This history offers different connections and possible reasons to become invested in DC. Perhaps in the two companies' rivalry to capture the loyalty of the reader, friendly as it often seemed to be, Lee's strategy was to capture his readers' hearts to say "Make Mine Marvel!" whereas DC may have used its icons and relied less on the language of editors and publishers. These are avenues worth exploring further.

But there seems to be no question that Lee's writing – from the earliest Marvel comic books, to his influence on fan club materials and their effort to make the reader feel heroic, to his direct exhortations to make readers heroic as found on the *FOOM* poster, to his efforts to identify Marvel as a company that cares but also one with relevance greater than simply as a publisher of comic books – directly led to Marvel Comics readers finding a personal investment in Marvel. With evidence from their letters, readers were also led to a greater personal and thoughtful investment in the real world around them.

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