

Marvel Reviews

THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL MARVEL REVIEWS

Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel: Vol. 1 No Normal*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015. Print.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel: Vol. 2 Generation Why*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015. Print.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel: Vol. 3 Crushed*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015. Print.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel: Vol. 4 Last Days*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015. Print.

One of the more celebrated and critically acclaimed comic book series in recent years, Marvel Comic's *Ms. Marvel* is now out in trade paperback editions of its initial 19 issue Pre-Secret Wars run. It is written by G. Willow Wilson, with artwork by Adrian Alphona—with the exception of Nos. 6 and 7 (drawn by Jacob Wyatt), No. 12 (drawn by Elmo Bondoc), and Nos. 13-15 (drawn by Takeshi Miyazawa)—and coloring by Ian Herring.

Each trade paperback contains between five to six stories from the *Ms. Marvel* series and also includes stand-alone stories from *All-New Marvel Now Point One* No. 1, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* No. 2, and *Amazing Spider-Man* Nos.

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7 and 8. These stand-alone stories feature Ms. Marvel by herself or with other superheroes from the Marvel Universe. As an added bonus, most of the trade paperback editions feature variant cover art by different Marvel artists, as well as Adrian Alphona's initial character designs and page layouts done before coloring.

For those unfamiliar with this character, Ms. Marvel is Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani-American teenage girl living in Jersey City who gains polymorph powers one evening after being exposed to a mysterious mist that envelopes Jersey City. Aided by her friend Bruno, Khan spends her time trying to figure out her powers, her identity as a superhero, and her relationships to her friends, family members, and Bruno—who secretly loves Khan.

G. Willow Wilson is a master at understanding the mindset of teenage girls and is able to echo their linguistic rhythms and interactions with adults. For instance, before she gains her powers in No. 1, Khan is content to write superhero fan fiction which she posts online. When her mother calls her to dinner, she wants to see how her piece of fan fiction where The Avengers save Planet Unicorn from an evil space creature is trending. Khan says, "One minute, Ammi [the word for "mother" in Urdu, the language of Pakistan] . . . there is epic stuff happening on the internet. My Avengers fanfic has almost 1,000 upvotes on freakingcool.com" (Wilson vol. 11:5). When she goes downstairs for dinner, Khan has an exchange with her Abu [the Urdu word for "father"] when she asks to go to a waterfront party where there will be boys and drinking. She pleads and pesters her father like many teenagers: "Come on Abu! I'm sixteen! I promise I won't do anything stupid! Don't you trust me?" (Wilson vol. 11:6), to which Abu fires back "You are excused straight to your room! And stay there until you find your manners!" (Wilson vol. 11:6).

Complimenting Wilson's language is the overall artwork by Adrian Alphona and colorist Ian Herring. Both work in tandem to present the world of Kamala Khan in a way that is appealing to the eye and aids in

telling the story. Alphona's artwork is realistic in tone, emphasizing the individuality of the characters; no one character looks or dresses the same and even the pretty people in Khan's high school are not Madison Avenue cutouts. Alphona has a great eye for detail, both within character costuming, as well as for seemingly insignificant details that act as Easter Eggs throughout the series. In No. 3, Khan is having breakfast and the box next to her says "GM-O's Tasty Cereal. Listen to Your Gut, Not the Lawsuits" (Wilson vol. 13:1). Similarly, in No. 16, Khan is eating at Soul Sonic Franks hot dog stand where under the list of items sold at the stand, there is listed "Panda," with a line through the word as though the stand ran out of Panda hot dogs (Wilson vol 416.1).

In coloring the series, Ian Herring chose a pallet that has more muddied muted earth tones that reflect the down-to-earth nature of Khan and her world. Mostly eschewing bright colors, Herring uses lots of washes, making each issue feel as though it was water colored. The end result gives objects in each panel a greater depth and texture. Objects can also appear to be more three-dimensional because of the wider range of colors that Herring provides with his washes. For instance, this process allows the mist enveloping Khan's kidnapped brother at the end of No. 17 to feel thick and menacing, as well as becoming less dense the closer it gets to the light bulb which illuminates the scene.

In discussing each of the volumes in detail, it is impossible to provide a general plot summary of each issue. Instead, if the stand-alone issues are set aside, each of the trade paperbacks contains a completed story arc that together act like different movements within a symphony providing a meta-structure to the series. Using this symphonic metaphor, here is a brief plot summary for each trade paperback. Care is taken not to reveal too many spoilers.

Ms. Marvel Vol. 1 *No Normal* acts as an adagio or slow movement to this symphony. Typically, a symphony begins with a faster movement, but Wilson provides a slow pace to the first five issues, setting the

groundwork for Khan's later exploits. The reader is introduced to Khan's world and how it works, from the way she interacts with her best friends Nakia and Bruno, to her interactions with the Cole's Academic High School "cool kids" Zoe and Josh, as well as her parents and brother Amir. After Khan is exposed to the mist that gives her polymorph powers, she has to learn how to control them. Initially, Khan physical appearance while using her powers is that of Carol Danvers, the former Ms. Marvel who became the new Captain Marvel. Part of her journey in this symphonic movement is to find her identity as a superhero outside of Danvers' shadow.

Whether G. Willow Wilson was concerned about the potential outcry against a Muslim superhero within the Marvel lineup or being deliberate in setting up the world for a payoff later in the series, not much superhero action takes place. She confronts Doyle, head b-boy, but does not stop him or the Inventor's plans (the Big Bad in Vols. 1 and 2). After reading this series as a whole, this slow movement pays off in later volumes with more action and a greater development of Khan's relationships.

Ms. Marvel Vol. 2 *Generation Why* is the fast allegro of this symphony. There is lots of action in these issues, with Ms. Marvel fighting the Inventor's giant alligators with the help of Wolverine in Nos. 6 and 7, being introduced to the Inhumans and their world starting in No. 9, as well as learning about the Inventor's plans in Nos. 9-10. Khan also learns why she developed superpowers and also gets a special guardian from the Inhumans to help her navigate her powers. Going into any more detail would spoil the plot of this action-packed volume.

Ms. Marvel: Vol. 3 *Crushed* is the allegretto con patetico (moderately fast with deep feeling) dance movement of this symphony and deals with issues of love and balancing that love against her responsibilities as a superhero. A guest appearance by Loki, whom is playfully dubbed a "hipster Viking" (Wilson vol. 312:8), sets into motion Bruno's desire to make his feelings known to Khan. He decides to invite her to the

Valentine's Day Dance at their school. Complications ensue and Bruno's goal of telling that he loves Khan is thwarted. Khan ends up falling for another boy, Kamran, who was introduced to her by her parents. By the end of the volume, she learns the dark truth behind Kamran's seemingly perfect facade.

Ms. Marvel: Vol. 4 *Last Days* starts out as a presto (very fast) movement as Ms. Marvel has to confront her biggest challenge yet—the possible end of the world as Manhattan and Jersey City looks like they are on the brink of total annihilation. At the end of No. 16, Khan gets to live out her dream of working besides Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) as they save her brother—and some kittens—from harm. The final two issues, Nos. 18 and 19, changes the tone of the symphony as it goes back to the *adagio tempo* of the first volume as Khan makes peace with her Ammi, her best friend Nakia, and comes to grip with her relationship with Bruno.

Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel is a teenage girl with a lot of heart and enthusiasm for life, which makes the series so appealing. Khan is not a perfect superhero, but a fallible one that struggles to be the best version of herself that she can be. It is this striving for the best in herself that makes me want to read this series. Ms. Marvel proves that not all young people are jaded and apathetic and that there is hope for the next generation (a subject discussed at length within the Vol. 2 *Generation Why*). In short, this series deserves the serious attention of every Marvel comic book aficionado who wants a good read. They will not be disappointed.

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Millar, Mark., writer. *Civil War: A Marvel Comics Event*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2006. Print

Mark Millar and several artists offer a compelling narrative in their graphic novel *Civil War* that was initially published in 2006 as a set of seven core comic books. The storyline is serious and dark, and features artwork that features a similar tone. Each of the major comic book publishers will occasionally feature a story arc that claims to “change everything” for the characters involved in their own self-contained universe and the *Civil War* story was labelled by Marvel Comics in a similar fashion. Millar fulfilled that promise, but approached the narrative from a slightly different perspective as the story was a political drama without a clear-cut hero or villain. While the political aspect may have turned some readers off initially, the overall story played out well and added to the long-standing Marvel Comics mythos.

The initial confrontation of the story centers on a group of new, unsupervised young superheroes that are making a reality television show while apprehending villains. Things go wrong quickly and many innocent people lose their lives, including children. The United States Government steps in and uses this incident in an attempt to initiate a registration act that would make it mandatory for every individual that wants to help people or fight crimes to register their identity. In essence, the superheroes would be government employees with government oversight and could be used as tools to by the government in any way that they deem necessary. This does not sit well with many of the characters that have come to question the morality of the government. This is an interesting perspective and juxtaposition of the early years of Marvel Comics. Many of the first issues of Captain America were supportive of the government, but times have changed and many today question the decisions of the government and the interests that they are claimed to be protecting.

Most of the previous catalogue of Marvel Comics storytelling was written in the classic prose that features heroes pitted against their arch enemies. The heroes are ultimately tasked with trying to protect innocent civilians and their individual freedoms, while defeating the enemies. Millar changes that emphasis and focuses instead on when the heroes' freedoms may be encroached upon and what happens when heroes face off against each other. A morally ambiguous proposal is presented to the heroes as a group and each hero is subsequently forced to make their own decision on where they stand. The final question for readers examining the back splash page of the graphic novel, sets the tone: "Whose side are you on?" Both sides have valid points, but both sides also make terrible mistakes. Millar offers an interesting dilemma for the individuals involved and the reader, while examining how people react when their closest friends do not share a similar perspective. The storyline emphasizes the notion that not all wars finish with a clear winner, while also offering the perspective that wars typically end with everyone losing something. Nobody really wins in this story as lives are lost and long-standing relationships are fractured. The reader will find themselves caught up in this war as well.

As the story unfolds and plot twists occur, Millar continually forces the readers to choose a side. The reader has to come to grips with the overarching moral issue of the registration act, while weighing their thoughts and feelings about characters that they have come to love and hate over the years. Some may find themselves in agreement with the registration act that aligns them with certain characters that they may not like. Conversely, some readers may be against the registration act, while realizing that their favorite characters are on the opposing side of the battle ground. This is a unique position for the reader and offers a moral dilemma in deciding between what they feel is right and their allegiances with the characters that they have come to know and trust. In this way, Millar uses the mechanism of cognitive dissonance to force the reader to

wrestle with this issues and interact with the story in a unique fashion. This is a microcosm of our own understanding of the world. We all have our own perspective through experiences and logic for how the world should operate, until we eventually succumb to the understanding that we do not get the opportunity to see the entire puzzle and how it all fits together.

The way that the story is unfolded is well done, until the ending. The final pages seem a bit rushed and leave little time for individual reflection of the characters and what has transpired throughout the battle. In typical comic book fashion, one side wins and one side loses, but it does not feel that way as the story concludes. As a perfect reflection of war, the conclusion offers evidence that everyone lost something and there is not a feeling of hope and resolution, as though the battle was worth what was lost. Relationships are irreparably changed and beloved heroes are imprisoned for their decisions. The fallout offered a unique conclusion that set the tone for later stories that would have a significant impact of the Marvel Comics universe.

Millar's graphic novel was later adapted and brought into the cinematic universe in 2016 and featured the main premise of heroes versus heroes, but there were great differences as well. The spark that starts the confrontation is quite different in the cinematic version and the revelation of the heroes' secret identities does not play a significant role as well. The graphic novel also offered a truer representation of the lengths that heroes will go to when attempting to protect the rights of individuals and standing up for what they believe is the best decision. The lines of morality are blurred as villains are recruited to hunt down long-standing heroes in order to bring them to justice. This part of the storyline is not found in the movie. In addition, dozens of characters are used in the graphic novel, while the cinematic version centered on less than ten characters per side. The ending of the movie is different from the graphic novel, but the resolution and unresolved questions are similar in nature.

Millar's graphic novel adds to the Marvel Comics lineage of great writing. There is a dark and serious tone that is quite different from earlier major event storylines. In addition, the reader is forced to choose sides for or against heroes that they have grown to know and trust over the years, while also having to consider the government's role in regulating superheroes. Millar lays out a great dilemma for the reader that makes one consider looking at events from another perspective. It is a trait that we can all stand to learn how to employ more often.

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Claremont, Chris, and John Byrne. "The Dark Phoenix Saga." *Uncanny X-Men*, 101-108 & 129-138 (1976-1980). Print.

The storyline known as "The Dark Phoenix Saga", written by the legendary Chris Claremont and illustrated by John Byrne, was originally published within the pages of the *Uncanny X-Men* comic book between 1976-1980, in issues #101-108 and #129-138. The story was also revisited and retold for younger audiences between 1995-1996, within the pages of *X-Men Adventures, Season III* issues 3-7 and 10-13, written by Ralph Macchio and illustrated predominantly by John Hebert and Ben Herrera. The storyline revolves around the character Jean Grey, a telepathic and telekinetic mutant and founding member of the X-Men, who is overcome by her incredible psionic powers and develops a secondary personality known as the Phoenix. This storyline is important as it shifts one of the most powerful mutants in the Marvel universe from a force for good, inclusion, acceptance, and right to one of the most powerful and deadly villains of all time, capable of genocide with the wave of her hand. The

impact that The Phoenix has had on the Marvel Universe is so pervasive that she is listed on numerous lists of the most important and memorable villains of all time. These include lists by IGN who ranked her as the 9th greatest comic book villain of all time and Wizard Magazine who placed her as #38 on their list of the one-hundred greatest villains ever, which encompassed not only comic books but all of pop culture including, but not limited to literature, film and television.

The story begins as Jean Grey and the other X-Men are returning from a space mission and are exposed to the energy from a solar flare, which interacts with Jean's abilities in an entirely unexpected manner. For the first time the reader sees the ultimate fruition of her incredible powers as she momentarily becomes a being of pure thought and energy. Upon crash landing in the bay near JFK airport, and after seemingly sacrificing herself for her friends, she is able to pull herself back together and majestically rises from the water. Despite her seeming resurrection, she is not as she was before: she is now The Phoenix a moniker and appearance that inherently surprises the rest of the X-Men, and the readers, as until now she has remained the sole member of the team to not adopt a codename. She then collapses into the water and her team members manage to get her unconscious body to the shore.

Jean has little time to recuperate from her ordeal as the X-Men soon find themselves in the middle of an intergalactic war for the fate of the Shi'Ar Empire and the rest of the universe. They come to the aid of Empress Lilandra who is trying to stop her brother Emperor D'Ken from attaining the incredibly powerful M'Kraan Crystal, an object that has the ability to erase and restructure all of reality. To make a long intricate story short the M'Kraan Crystal is fractured in the struggle and the only person who can stop it from consuming all of existence is Jean. In order to do so, she must embrace The Phoenix Force and allow it to fully possess her at the risk of completely losing herself. She uses it to syphon the life force

from her friends and repair the crystal. In doing so she saves all of reality, barely managing to retain her humanity in the process.

These events bring her into the sights of a power hungry organization known as The Hellfire Club who posses a mind-tap device that was developed by their White Queen, future X-Man, Emma Frost. The mind-tap allows them to project illusions directly into Jean's mind in an effort to manipulate her into joining their organization. The X-Men are able to thwart their evil plot, but not before causing the enraged Phoenix force to fully encompass Jean, becoming the Dark Phoenix. In an attempt to sever her ties with her mortal life, she attacks the X-Men and leaves for a distant universe. Upon arrival The Phoenix is so drained from the journey that she devours the sun of the D'Bari solar system. This causes a supernova that destroys everything, killing the entire population of their planet of over five-billion people. A nearby Shi'Ar spacecraft witnessed this event and was able to alert the rest of the empire of the impending threat, before they were destroyed as well.

The Shi'Ar in consultation with the rest of the intergalactic council decide that the Dark Phoenix and in turn Jean Grey, must be put to death because of the serious threat she poses to the universe. In order to stop this verdict, Professor X challenges Lilandra to the irrefutable Arin'n Haelar, a Shi'ar duel of honor, with the victors having final say over the fate of The Phoenix. In the duel the Shi'Ar Imperial Guard make quick work of the X-Men. Feeling cornered the Phoenix begins to overtake Jean once again and Lilandra initiates plan Omega, which would ultimately destroy the entire solar system in hopes of stopping The Phoenix. Jean, who is struggling to maintain control, gives an incredibly emotional goodbye to Cyclopes, her lover, and then commits suicide using a disintegration ray, sacrificing herself for the greater good. The story ends with an intergalactic being known as The Watcher saying, "Jean Grey could have lived to become a god. But it was more important to her that she die... a human" (Claremont & Byrne).

This story is where numerous characters made their first or strongest appearance making it even more special to fans. This story introduces future X-Men Kitty Pryde, Emma Frost, and Dazzler to Marvel continuity, all of which were mainstays for years to come. This is also one of the first storylines that brought fan favorite character Wolverine to the forefront of the X-men universe, as he not only confesses his love for our tragic hero, but also finds his place in the team as a whole. The real question that one should ask here is what makes this story so memorable beyond these character introductions and why did its impact transcend time as it has? It is important to not only examine the effect that the story has had on the greater Marvel universe but to also review what the character itself has meant as well. One of the defining features of the Phoenix, not the character per say, but more so the force that consumes her, is that it is not inherently good or bad as it is a delicate force of nature which is "the embodiment of the very passion of Creation – the spark that gave life to the Universe, [and] the flame that will ultimately consume it" (Claremont & Byrne). The delicate nature of the Phoenix force is ultimately one of the major themes that is both exemplified and exploited within the storyline and shows just how easily a force for good can be corrupted into something much more sinister.

It was mainly the ruthless psychic manipulation, at the hands of Mastermind, that left Jean completely under the control of the Phoenix force and what led to her inevitably dark actions. To some this notion resonates as a fear which audiences can relate to for various reasons. The fear of losing control for any reason is one that many people hold. Mastermind's actions can be seen as analogues with rape, not only controlling her mind, but her body and powers as well. Some could even read his actions as equivalent to what takes place upon indoctrination into a religious doctrine, cult, or even in some instances a terrorist organization. In addition to this main theme of control, or the lack thereof, there are also the major themes of human nature and the corruption that

comes with power flowing through the veins of this storyline. The Phoenix is initially established as a source of ultimate and divine power for good, but the story quickly turns her into something dark, hinting to the notion that absolute power corrupts as it did in this case. Though power is a strong element, it is the emphasis on being human that is the most important aspect of the story, because it is Jean's desire to retain her humanity rather than be a goddess that speaks to the human nature in everyone. The idea that human nature always wins out is a powerful one. If sacrificing herself for the sake of the universe is the one thing she can do retain her human nature in the end, than that is what must be done. This is a theme that has resonated through many Marvel stories, and if you think about what really makes these characters so special, it is the emphasis on their human condition, not their powers, that really make them accessible to and memorable for readers.

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Goddard, Drew, creator and Stephen DeKnight, showrunner. *Daredevil*. ABC Studios, DeKnight Productions, Goddard Textiles Marvel Entertainment, and the Walt Disney Company, 2015. Netflix Instant.

Originally published by Marvel Comics, the vigilante character Daredevil sprang from the minds of creators Stan Lee and Bill Everett in 1964. Blinded by toxic chemicals as a youth, Matt Murdock would grow up to become a lawyer who defends the oppressed denizens of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood by day, and dons the Daredevil identity to fight crime by night. Gifted with a superhuman ability to perceive everything around him – his radar sense – Daredevil often appears preternaturally cognizant of his environment, and can seemingly “see” what his opponents will do before they act.

The character has appeared in various live-action and animated television series over the years, but mainly as a guest or minor character; Daredevil would not headline a film until the 2003 movie adaptation produced and released by 20th Century Fox. When the rights to the character reverted to Disney-Marvel in early 2013, the media conglomerate quickly announced that Daredevil would appear in the shared film/TV universe known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Around this same time, Netflix successfully launched its own original television series, *House of Cards*, in early 2013, and was looking for more original content to expand its library and entice people to subscribe to its rapidly growing streaming service. Sensing an opportunity, Disney-Marvel arranged a deal with Netflix to produce and distribute an original *Daredevil* television series, and the entire 13 episode season launched in April 2015 to much critical and popular acclaim.

The series' direct-to-streaming nature facilitates a structure more akin to a miniseries. It also allows the show's creators to incorporate a darker, more adult tone than that found in the majority of MCU characters and

narratives, which are generally fun, colorful, and family-oriented. This darkness manifests throughout *Daredevil*, which features numerous blood-soaked fight scenes and enough coarse language to make Captain America blush (if he were ever to appear on the show, Steve Rogers would likely spend much of his screen time admonishing the other characters with cries of “Language!”). As such, the series feels more in line with Marvel’s defunct Max imprint, which specialized in producing R-rated comic books aimed squarely at adult readers. Moreover, *Daredevil* has apparently established the tone for the entire Marvel Netflix Universe (MNU); both *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* employ similarly adult tones, and the upcoming *Punisher* series undoubtedly will as well (especially given that character’s dark history). Thus, the MNU quickly establishes its own identity and thereby sets itself apart from the MCU proper.

The Netflix model allows for longer-form storytelling that recalls the current decompressed model of comic book narrative, whereas the films that comprise the MCU represent more of a compressed style of storytelling (i.e. narratives span multiple films, but stories must be wrapped up in two hours). Indeed, the television series essentially functions as a very long miniseries or 13-hour television movie. In addition, the ability to binge-watch the entire series in one sitting aligns the show with trade paperbacks that collect multiple issues of a single story arc and reprint them in book format. As such, *Daredevil* and the other shows that comprise the MNU recall the source material, while also allowing for a deeper, more mature exploration of the characters and events portrayed onscreen.

The Netflix model allows for a more nuanced depiction of the central character, and for the showrunners to push the boundaries of the Marvel house style. Indeed, the show appears to take most of its cues from Frank Miller’s 1979-1983 run on the *Daredevil* comic book, which was marked by adult-oriented stories. Furthermore, this period in the character’s history featured several defining moments, most notably the death of the assassin

Elektra at the hands of the villain Bullseye. The Netflix series not only incorporates and adapts many of Miller's ideas, but also apes the grim-and-gritty attitude established by the stories he produced during this period.

By attempting to align the show with Miller's somber take on the character, series creator Drew Goddard and his team ensure that *Daredevil* feels radically different from even the serious-minded MCU films like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Whereas the MCU films have been designed to appeal to a broad mainstream audience of all ages, *Daredevil* is decidedly aimed at an adult audience who would be less squeamish with depictions of intense violence and mature themes. More importantly, the series set the tone for the rest of the MNU, including *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist*, and *The Punisher*. Yet, the show reflects the overall Disney-Marvel approach to storytelling. *Daredevil* and the other MNU shows recall the way shared comic book universes establish different tones for their different heroes, which has become something of a hallmark of the MCU overall (for instance, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* recalls the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s while *Thor: The Dark World* feels like an epic fantasy or science fiction tale in the vein of *Star Wars*). Thus, while the MNU is noticeably different from the larger MCU in terms of tone, it still reflects this shared universe approach to storytelling.

Disney-Marvel hopes that *Daredevil* and the other MNU series will serve as the foundation for another *Avengers*-style crossover (i.e., *The Defenders*). As such, these shows act as the MCU in microcosm, using the latest entertainment technology, Internet streaming, to reach a specific audience (i.e. affluent young people) and thereby perpetuate the consumption of not just the MCU but the Marvel Universe as a whole. Thus, *Daredevil* represents both a departure from the characterization and storytelling prevalent in the MCU, while also demonstrating how it aligns with the overall transmedia experience established by Disney-Marvel.

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Agent Carter: The Complete First Season. Created by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. Perf. Hayley Atwell, James D'Arcy, Enver Gjokaj, Chad Michael Murray, Lyndsy Fonseca, Shea Whigham, Bridget Regan, and Dominic Cooper. Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2015. DVD.

Agent Carter: Season 2. Created by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. Perf. Hayley Atwell, James D'Arcy, Enver Gjokaj, Chad Michael Murray, Bridget Regan, Wynn Everett, Reggie Austin, Lesley Boone, Lotte Verbeek, and Dominic Cooper. Amazon Prime Video, 2016. Web. September 23, 2016.

Some regular television viewers might be tempted, on first watching Marvel's recent two-season action-adventure series *Agent Carter* (ABC/Marvel Studios, 2015-16), to write it off as an exercise in mega-corporate money-grubbing, a lower-budget effort to cash in on the spectacular popularity of the ever-expanding Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) franchise, and particularly the *Captain America* films, with which the series is intimately connected. Certainly the comic-book superhero action-adventure sub-genre, despite (or possibly because of?) its popularity, is among those most likely to be ignored come Emmy or Oscar season. And while awards are perhaps not the best indicator of quality for any pop culture artifact, they can serve as an accurate barometer for the seriousness with which the cultural establishment regards the particular artifact in question. Like the original comics that inspired them, mainstream superhero television and cinema productions often seem handicapped by their very popularity, which is regarded by many as an indication that they lack serious literary or cinematic intent.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that *Agent Carter* is less likely to reward serious critical inquiry than, say, *Mad Men*, *Downton Abbey*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, shows that are known for their popularity among academics. More than just another entry in the recent film and television superhero sweepstakes, *Agent Carter* is an essential chapter in Marvel's virtually unprecedented creation of an integrated cinematic and television universe that mirrors Stan Lee's calculated creation of the comic-book universe in the early sixties. The show functions as an immediate sequel to the MCU film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), which told of the transformation of Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) into Captain America during World War II and of the development of the tragic romance between Rogers and Carter. *Agent Carter* picks up almost exactly where *The First Avenger* left off, following the adventures of British superspy Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell, reprising her role from the film) in New York and Los Angeles during the two years after the war. Since the American intelligence agency Carter works for, the SSR (Strategic Science Reserve), is the wartime precursor to the Cold War spy agency SHIELD—created for the comics by Stan Lee in 1965 but now a central element of the MCU movies, as well as of the successful ABC series *Agents of SHIELD*—one of the goals of *Agent Carter* is to detail the events that led to the transformation of the SSR into SHIELD and thus to fill in the gaps between Marvel's accounts of the origins of the MCU in *The First Avenger* and the contemporary adventures recounted in the various *Avengers* films (which include the *Avengers*, *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, *Hulk*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *Ant-Man* films, as well as the forthcoming *Doctor Strange* and *Black Panther* films). The series also prominently features Dominic Cooper in his recurring role as the young Howard Stark, father of the tormented narcissist Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), who becomes Iron Man in the parts of the story set in the twenty-first century; *Agent Carter* thus helps connect two of the

central branches of the MCU in an ongoing story arc that appears to have culminated in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).

Adapting the form of the comic book superhero adventure for television, and blending it with a number of other genres (including Cold War espionage and science-fiction thrillers, war stories, crime dramas, film noir, detective fiction, the classic American Western, and even the meticulous television period drama, which has seen such a renaissance in recent years), *Agent Carter* stages a dialogue between Cold War superhero narratives (pioneered, in this case, in the Marvel comic book renaissance of the early 1960s) and contemporary Age of Terror popular entertainment, revealing itself as a significant performative mirror of our particular historical and cultural moment. *Agent Carter* participates in a broad cultural exchange by which Marvel allows its classic superhero characters to be appropriated and reimagined for an entirely different medium and audience, allowing the show to posit close mythic similarities between the two periods it represents—the immediately post-World-War-II early Cold War setting in which it takes place and the specific post-9/11 setting in which it is written and performed. Though in some ways the show is more closely affiliated with other post-9/11 American TV series like *Smallville*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mad Men*, *Fringe*, and Marvel’s *Agents of SHIELD* than it is with the comic-book stories and feature films that are its primary sources, the other relevant works that factor into the series include the original Captain America comics of the 1940s and 1960s, the more recent *Death of Captain America* storyline (also from the comics), and the first two *Captain America* feature films.

One of the most interesting elements of *Agent Carter*, from the perspective of comic-book history, is the fact that the producers have depended to a significant extent on the basic situation established by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in their earliest Captain America comics of the 1940s, in which his “original assignment was to combat spies and fifth columnists in the United States” (Sanderson 15). In 1965, after Kirby and

Stan Lee resurrected the character, they began to tell the stories of his adventures in the European theater during the war; this too is reflected in the setup of *Agent Carter* through its emphasis on her experiences as a World War II combat veteran who fought alongside Cap, particularly in the first-season episode “The Iron Ceiling,” which reunites Peggy with her wartime colleagues the Howling Commandos (created by Lee and Kirby in 1963 and brought into the MCU in *The First Avenger*) for a secret mission in the Soviet Union. In essence, the producers have gone back to the situations of the earliest Captain America stories of the forties and sixties and replaced Steve Rogers with Peggy Carter, who is even depicted at one point (in a dream sequence) carrying Cap’s iconic shield.

The significance of replacing an iconic World-War-II-era male superhero with a less iconic post-9/11 female one (though Peggy Carter was originally introduced in the comics in 1966) should be fairly obvious. The popularity of the series, particularly among women, reflects a timely interest in female representation in the historically male-dominated field of superhero mythology; and the issues addressed in the series are an accurate reflection of the historical issues faced by career women in the years after World War II, some of which are, unfortunately, still relevant today. These issues include the casual condescending sexism of the male-dominated workplace and the travails of powerful women being forced out of meaningful careers by less competent male competitors returning from their military service overseas, issues that are foregrounded by Peggy’s unique status as a female combat veteran.

In addition, like most of the movies in the Avengers sequence, the two long story arcs of *Agent Carter* reflect the particular anxieties and paranoias of contemporary America with plot points and imagery that specifically reference the events of 9/11: the dramatic climax of *The First Avenger* involves Captain America foiling a Nazi attempt to divebomb a giant experimental superjet into Manhattan by taking control of the plane and deliberately crashing it harmlessly into the North Atlantic, sacrificing

himself in the process; just before the plane goes down, he and Peggy have a last poignant exchange over the radio. This scenario is repeated—with, spoiler alert, a happier ending—in the first season finale of *Agent Carter* when Peggy has a similar exchange with a brainwashed Howard Stark, who is about to divebomb a plane equipped with chemical weapons into Manhattan. These situations explicitly recall not just the images of hijacked jetliners crashing into the World Trade Center towers, but also the stories connected with United Flight 93, whose passengers fought back against their hijackers and sacrificed themselves when they prevented the plane from hitting its intended target by crashing it into a field in Pennsylvania. Prominent among the accounts of Flight 93 are the heart-wrenching stories of passengers' final cell-phone conversations with loved ones. The related forms of TV drama and comic book adventure thus address issues both of historical interest and of particular importance to Americans in the 2010s, specific issues having to do with the contemporary struggles of women, veterans, African Americans, and immigrants, as well as more general themes relating to the tensions between personal privacy and national security, individual self-determination and communal responsibility, liberty and authority, trust and secrecy, theatricality and reality, performance and identity.

As of this writing, *Agent Carter* has been cancelled by ABC, with all of its major storylines left unresolved, and not without protest from its devoted fans; a Change.org petition asking Netflix to pick up the show began circulating soon after the announcement of its cancellation, so far to little apparent effect. But whether Peggy Carter returns or not—and there is reason to think that Marvel Studios will find some way to integrate the story of the creation of SHIELD into other parts of the MCU—*Agent Carter* deserves to be seen not only for its sumptuous period production and costume design, its sly writing and acting, its wit and heart, and its essential position as an untold chapter in the ongoing MCU superhero saga, but for its elevation of powerful women in commanding lead roles

and for its emphasis on issues faced by women and veterans in both of its relevant time periods.

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