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Stan Lee: In Memoriam

By Galilea Navarro

It is unarguable that Stan Lee transformed the comic book landscape into what it was, what it is, and what it will be for years to come. As one of the most important and influential figures in American pop culture, he revolutionized the idea, the notion, of what it means to be a hero. Lee was a relentless spirit with a work ethic to match, who used his impoverished upbringing to pull himself from the shadows of an uncertain future to become the man he is remembered as today. And though he did achieve exactly that, it was not without the help of a collective of brilliant minds from writers to artists that helped Marvel's "Method Man" establish his legacy. It is difficult to think of a world without Stan Lee, as his knack for spotting—and oftentimes exploiting—talent gave the world some of its most beloved characters, and his cameos in the films have endeared him to fans all over the world. His influence and celebrity are as vast as his controversies, from copyright lawsuits to allegations of sexual harassment; still, he managed to forge a history and status based on his mystique and opportunistic, if creative, nature. Gifted as he was, Lee's strength lay in his ability to see an opportunity and seize it, which often created friction between him and the same minds who would help him build his empire, his fortune, and ultimately, his ego.

The Art of the Word

Stanley Martin Lieber loved words: books, newspapers, ketchup bottles, anything. He looked for anything he could get his hands on to read in an effort to escape his otherwise dreary existence during the Great Depression, which severely impacted his childhood at the age of seven. Despite this, Stanley had a dream that no depression

could keep him from: he would be the one to write the next “Great American Novel.” That dream kept him going through the highs and lows of his early life and into adulthood. He immersed himself in the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Mark Twain, but had a special affinity for William Shakespeare, who he began reading before the age of ten. “I didn’t understand a lot of it in those days, but I loved the words. I loved the rhythm of the words.”¹ This interest would help in his work later in life, from the philosophical voice of the Silver Surfer, to the Elizabethan dialogue of the mighty Thor. His favorite possession as a child was a gift his mother gave him—a small wooden stand that he used to prop his books up as he ate at the table. When there was nothing to read, Lee would write and illustrate stories to amuse himself, unknowingly creating the first comic book strips that would ultimately become his life and legacy.

He was born to Jewish-Romanian parents Celia and Jack Lieber in their small Manhattan apartment on December 22, 1922 and by the time Stan was in his youth, he had moved several times due to money, or rather, the scarcity of it. His mother was never far from the kitchen, where she was found cooking or cleaning, and his father was a dress cutter who only worked intermittently after the Depression. The memory of his father sitting at their small table reading the “want ads” looking for something, anything, to help his family, is an image Lee remembered almost too vividly. Watching him go out in search of work and coming home hours later, only to walk in with the same disheartened look on his face every time was almost too much for Lee to bear, “I can imagine the depression he felt. Forced idleness is a terrible thing.”² Lee knew what it meant to be hungry and cold, he understood what it meant to be poor, and he demonstrated an appreciation and care for his family from a young age:

¹ Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 4.

² Stan Lee and George Mair, *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 8.

My brother and I always regretted that fate had not been kinder to them and that they couldn't have had happier lives. They [parents] must have loved each other when they married, but my earliest recollections were of the two of them arguing, quarrelling incessantly. Almost always it was over money, or the lack of it. I realized at an early age how the specter of poverty, the never-ending worry about not having enough money to buy groceries or to pay rent can cast a cloud over a marriage. I'll always regret the fact that, by the time I was earning enough to make things easier for them, it was too late.³

This was the condition of life during the Depression, and a condition that resonates in many households today. His impoverished life helped build his underdog origin story, that of the man who came from nothing and became something.

Celia and Jack had differing ways to raise Stan and his brother; Jack could be calculating and strict, while Celia would fill her children, particularly Stan, with her own hopes and dreams, and supported her son in everything. Stan surrounded himself in his mother's love amidst his father's demanding nature.

Lee graduated early from DeWitt Clinton High School, at sixteen and a half, recalling how his mother wanted him to finish school as soon as possible to get a job to help support his family. He claimed that as how he had a strong work ethic drummed into him early. In his spare time after classes he began working at a series of part-time jobs, including writing obituary notices. Though the job paid well, Lee eventually left because he thought writing about people in the past tense was too depressing. He also wrote publications for a hospital, delivered sandwiches and was even an usher at a movie theater where he said he had an encounter with

³ Ibid., 7.

the then First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, where he tripped in front of her while helping her to her seat and she picked him up. He was happy to work in a place where people came to escape, as movies and books offered relief from the Depression, and Stan was greatly influenced himself by the films he saw, particularly those of Errol Flynn. Though he did not remember much from his time in school, Lee did remember his favorite teacher, Leon B. Ginsberg Jr., who made him realize that humor was the best way to reach people, hold their attention, and get your point across. It is a lesson he tried to apply to everything he did later in life.

Perhaps one of the most significant moments in his life was when, at the age of fifteen, he participated in a contest held by The New York Herald Tribune where in 500 words or less participants had to write what they believed was "The Biggest News of the Week" for cash prizes. Lee won the contest three straight weeks, and after the third week he received a letter from the editor asking him to let someone else have a chance. The editor wrote to Lee that he should consider writing for a living, words of advice that would change his life, and though it seems like a story worth adding to his "underdog origins," the anecdote is if nothing else, greatly exaggerated. There are no records of a Stanley Lieber ever winning the top prize for those contests. He placed seventh the first week, but not the second. The third week he was one of one hundred who received an honorable mention for his work, and then his name disappeared from further competitions. This is only one of many instances where Stan used his power as a compelling storyteller to further his persona; not that many people seemed to mind anyway, since this was very much in alignment with the "Stan will be Stan" personality many came to know him for, the same personality that helped him begin his path at Timely Comics.

Making Marvel

In 1939, Timely Comics opened its doors and among its new employees was Stanley Lieber, nineteen and ready to conquer the world. The publisher of Timely Comics, Martin Goodman, was

related to Lee through his wife, who happened to be Lee's cousin. Stan almost immediately began to build his extensive resume, reputation, and history within the walls of Timely. Once he was hired into the department that would change his life, Joe Simon, a future comic book legend, took Lee on as his assistant. Lee's job was to fill ink wells, proofread, and bring lunch to Simon and his partner, Jack Kirby, who himself would become an influential comic book writer and artist. Lee admired Jack's and Joe's talents and professionalism, likening it to "working for two idols", and stated working for them "was an education" for him.⁴ He stated:

We never became very friendly at the time because they never thought of me as a peer, and there's no reason why they should have. I had started as an inexperienced apprentice, and it's hard to live that first impression down. Anyway, I didn't work with them long enough for our relationship to change significantly—or for them to learn the sheer wonderfulness of me.⁵

Lee made his comic book debut when Joe asked him to write the filler text on *Captain America* issue no. 3, "Captain America Foils the Traitor's Revenge," published in May 1941. In it, Stanley Lieber first used the pseudonym that would become his legacy: Stan Lee. He observed how Jack and Joe were able to work around the clock without letting egos get in the way. Back in the day, artists would sell their work, often by the pound, without concern for enhancing their portfolios. Stan Lee on the other hand, began to write his name on everything, regardless of whether or not he had any part of it. Jack Kirby and Joe Simon left Timely Comics shortly after Lee began working there, while Lee remained there for years despite rumors the two were fired because of him, rumors he adamantly stated were false. After the duo split up in 1956,

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

Kirby returned to Timely to work alongside Lee in their most productive period between 1961 and 1972. With the departure of Kirby and Simon, Martin Goodman appointed a then nineteen year-old Stan Lee as interim editor until he found someone more qualified. When Goodman stopped looking, possibly due to the fact that he may have forgotten, Lee seized the opportunity to get his work out. Lee was in a safe space, a haven for creativity, but right outside Timely's front door was their business, and it was losing interest in comic books due to their lack of originality. Lee recalled, "While I really enjoyed my job and the stories I was writing, there was one thing that both irritated and frustrated me. It was the fact that nobody, outside of our own little circle, had a good word to say about comic books. To the public at large, comics were at the very bottom of the cultural totem pole."⁶

A Timely Change

Lee volunteered for the army during World War II shortly after being appointed interim editor, and was stationed stateside with the Signal Corps, where he was given the title of "playwright," which, according to Lee, "was only held by nine other men in the army".⁷ While he wrote manuscripts, training films and slogans for the war, he continued to send work to Timely Comics; he was never one to miss a deadline. The day he was discharged from duty, Lee wasted no time getting back to work and drove straight in without taking a break that same day. Lee gave himself the name and position of "Supreme Editor" wherein when Goodman did not want to deal with a situation or make a decision, he would send in Lee to clear it up or clean it up, making him the middleman between the writers and artists and the head of Timely. Lee even had his own office where he managed the comic book assembly line and wrote scripts for the Captain America comics. As a writer, he always seemed more enthusiastic about writing than his peers; Dave Gautz, a

⁶ Ibid., 56-57.

⁷ Jeff McLoughlin, *Stan Lee: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 59.

comic artist who worked with Lee, said in an interview, Lee was like “the Orson Welles of comics.”⁸

The year was 1961, Lee was in his forties, and still nowhere near to writing his novel. It was around this time he decided he was going to quit Timely Comics. That was until DC Comics re-invented the superhero archetype and Goodman tasked him with creating something akin to the Justice League.

Before Lee modernized Marvel in the 1960’s, most comic book heroes wouldn’t have been much fun at a cocktail party. Their dialogue was as wooden as the pulp they were printed on, and their personalities ran all the way from A, a crime has been committed, to B, we must catch this ne’er-do-well before he strikes again.⁹

Taking his wife's advice, Lee went straight to work creating heroes that he was passionate about, heroes who were more human. And so, the First Family was born. The Fantastic Four was the first group Lee created, though there would be debate with Jack Kirby years later on the matter. So began the creation of comic book characters who were normal people who happened to protect the Earth; Lee put the "human" in "superhuman." With Jack Kirby at his side, Lee created heroes like the Hulk, Iron Man, and Thor. With Steve Ditko, he created Dr. Strange, and, one of the most memorable and iconic characters, Marvel’s friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.

In the aftermath of the war, the economy began to flourish, and with it, the comic book industry. Lee remembers feeling the excitement and high energy in the company because there were no

⁸ Bob Batchelor, *Stan Lee: The Man Behind Marvel*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 31.

⁹ Peter Larsen, “How Stan Lee changed pop culture, comic books and movies forever,” *Daily News*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.dailynews.com/2018/11/12/how-stan-lee-changed-pop-culture-comic-books-and-movies-forever/>

more paper shortages; this meant there was no longer a limit to the amount of issues one could publish. The public was ready and willing to pay for entertainment after years of being rationed and kept in a constant state of hardship.

In 1972, Lee stopped writing and became publisher and the eventual face of Marvel comics when he succeeded Goodman. When this occurred, Lee started making changes at Timely that would push the company into a new era of entertainment. As editor, Lee introduced a new system of credit, one where not only were the writer and the artist given credit in the issues, but so were the penciller and the letterer. It was said by many that he was a brilliant editor with a razor sharp skill for talent scouting; after all, many of the artists that worked with Lee did their best work there. Gautz recognized Lee's knack as publisher, saying he was quick to notice a trend and had artists do the same thing on their comic books. Lee also attempted to expand the comic book market to appeal to girls, and said he never understood why everyone thought they were primarily for boys. However, during his time as publisher and editor, it seemed Lee hardly flourished creatively, and chose an imitative strategy that appeared to be more driven by greed than an appreciation for art. This seemed to follow what Goodman did in his time, where Timely was labeled as "an opportunistic follower of popular trend."¹⁰ Though Lee did give himself inflated amounts of credit, he made sure that the artists were given a spotlight as well.

The Marvel Method

The Marvel Method was a different approach to writing and drawing comic books, and was employed and later perfected at Marvel Comics, wherein Lee gave artists ideas or pieces of an idea, for comic books instead of full scripts, and allowed the writers and artists free range to decide what happened on the page. After Lee left the plotting to the writers and artists, he would add

¹⁰ Raphael and Spurgeon, *Rise and Fall*, 37.

the text or elaborate on artist notes, thus giving him the "writing credit" he is known for. Comic historian Peter Sanderson said it best: "Marvel was pioneering new methods of comics storytelling and characterization, addressing more serious themes, and in the process keeping and attracting readers in their teens and beyond."¹¹ Stan revitalized the comic book industry with his collaborations with Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, and created the shared universe the characters live in and that audiences love. Lee published "The Secrets Behinds the Comics" a while later, where he dispelled all the behind-the-scenes secrets of the comic book industry and promoted it with the grandiose flair he is known for. In the comics, Lee also wrote a monthly column where he addressed issues of discrimination and prejudice, and used the platform to fight against injustice.

One of Us

The X-Men are a prime example of how Lee used his platform to fight injustice and prejudice. These comics were praised for their diversity and how its portrayal of mutant oppression mirrored that of the Civil Rights movement. The Fantastic Four was about a family with superhero powers who fought over human issues amongst each other; they were the characters Lee always wanted to write about. They were relatable to the people, who loved the new approach of showing deep human flaws that demonstrated tolerance and humanity among people who were less than perfect. Ultimately, the Fantastic Four and the X-Men "were outsiders who fought for a better society"¹² and this message echoes across time into today's day and age.

Lee wrote columns in the back of Marvel issues beginning in 1967 called "Stan's Soapbox" where he talked about anything

¹¹ *Marvel Saga, Volume I.*

¹² Ken Paulson, "Superhero Stan Lee fought for justice and diversity with relatable comic book characters," *USA Today*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/11/12/stan-lee-comic-books-superheroes-justice-diversity-good-hero-column/1981744002/>.

worth informing readers about. Of these columns, the two most arguably famous ones were his "Racism Essay" from 1968, which condemns racism and promotes humanity, and his "Politics in Comic-Books Essay" where Lee tackles some reader's criticism that comic books should not have lessons because they are supposed to be a form of escapism. In the 1960s, children read about powered humans who felt a sense of responsibility to the people, and characters such as Hawkeye, Dr. Strange and Professor X, heroes with disabilities, became some of earth's mightiest defenders despite all odds. Black Panther, created by Kirby and Lee in the 1960s, gave the world its first black superhero who didn't adhere to stereotypes; the king of the most technologically advanced country in the world, the fictional nation of Wakanda. The recently adapted film of the same name, *Black Panther*, is one of Marvel's most successful films at the box office, and gave Marvel Studios its first three Oscars at the 91st Academy Awards. *Black Panther*, whose cast is predominately black, was praised for providing the representation many black audiences had been wanting to see in an industry where there has never been many films of its kind. From a child seeing what they could grow up to be, to women's skin tones and hair being celebrated on screen, *Black Panther* became an icon many could relate to, admire, and even become. And even though minority representation is still long overdue in other arenas, creators like Lee, Kirby and Ditko were doing it long before superhero films took over the big screen.

All Around

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been dominating the domestic and overseas box offices for over a decade, and has generated over \$19 billion with its twenty-two films, shattering box office records in the process. *Avengers: Endgame* made over \$1 billion in its first opening weekend, a feat that had never before been accomplished and is quickly on its way to surpassing *Avatar* as the film with the highest worldwide box office gross of all time. All this was in part due to Lee, who, in the 1980s, left his position of publisher with

Marvel and moved to Hollywood with his wife in order to help develop Marvel's film and television properties. A decade later, he entered a purely symbolic position in the company as "Chairman Emeritus."¹³ This meant he was not involved in the day-to-day affairs of the company, but held an executive producer credit on all Marvel properties, nonetheless.

Though it would be difficult to imagine a world without Lee's impact, many of his works with Kirby have since been expanded on, giving more depth to the characters they created long ago. In doing so, talented artists helped further Lee's legacy as a creative genius. Even though the X-Men were created by Kirby and Lee, it took a man like Chris Claremont to come on board decades later and breathe new life into the characters, with a more diverse cast who were even more relatable than the originals. A man like Walt Simonson delved more deeply into the mythical side of Thor, helping shape the god of thunder into who he is today; and Christopher Priest elevated the king of Wakanda by showcasing the struggles of an African king who also doubled as a superhero. Frank Miller came in and re-imagined the "tortured ninja" that is Daredevil and essentially re-created blind lawyer-turned-vigilante, Matt Murdock. Lee's co-creations have inspired many people, like Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, creators of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, who were inspired by Daredevil and became pop culture icons in their own right. The truth is that the power of Stan Lee lies in that many stories would not exist without his groundwork, regardless of whether he created them. He made readers, the true believers, feel like they were part of a community through his constant communication and interaction with them, cementing a bond between comic creator and comic reader.

Complex Controversy

Though Stan Lee may just be a persona for Stanley Lieber, a character he played for so long he inevitably became him, it should

¹³ Batchelor, *The Man Behind Marvel*, 190.

not be forgotten that he had a grandiose sense of self, and a massive ego that reflected on everything he did. In his self-named "bio-autography" *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*, he begins the book with not so subtle brags and flattery, even if he doesn't mean to present himself that way. Steve Ditko, in a now historic comic book interview in the 1990's, stated that Lee had the "bare bones" idea for Spider-Man and it was really he who made Spider-Man what he is today. Until his death in 1994, Jack Kirby claimed that Lee was a fraud and it was he who had the ideas for all of their so-called "co-creations" including The Incredible Hulk, Thor and Iron Man. Lee spent the second half of his life engulfed in lawsuits, one of which was his internet-based superhero studio Stan Lee Media, which filed for bankruptcy a little over two years after its initial founding. Under Lee, Marvel capitalized on the universes its characters lived in and found ways to link them together for crossover potential in an effort to expand their profits through films and television, echoing the earlier sentiment of Lee being interested in money and not the art of the comics. Similarly, in a 2010 trial between him and Jack Kirby's estate, they argued that the Fantastic Four were actually singularly the creation of Kirby, his execution of the characters made them what they are today. Lee refutes this, claiming the Fantastic Four were his creation: he wrote the outline and then handed it to Kirby for the artistic concept. John Romita Jr., who worked with Lee on Daredevil, called him a con man, but admitted that he did deliver; Lee never shied away from this statement either, as he was always more than happy to take credit for himself, and more than often forgetting to mention his collaborators. It was for these reasons, along with lack of payment, that Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby left Marvel, and had nothing good to say about Lee until the day they died. An instance of the unequal divide Lee had created as a result of his self-promotion was when he received a five year contract and pay raise, while Kirby received a loan from Marvel's parent company with 6 percent interest. Steve Ditko said in an interview, "The implication is that only Lee has 'ideas.' Only Lee did anything purposefully. The rest of us artists, well, let's face it, we're just

'lucky.'"¹⁴ In that same token, Ditko argued that Lee did not even dialogue their work, claiming Lee would get someone in the office to do it and write his name on it as if he had done the work. In this way, not only did he collect editor's pay, but writer's pay as well. Ditko stated he did not think Lee had a bad head for business, but he did believe that Lee took advantage of the people who worked for him.

Endless lawsuits and discrediting interviews were not the only thing Lee contended with, as a nursing company hired to take care of him accused Lee of sexually assaulting every nurse who went to his home. The company later received a "cease and desist" letter from Tom Lallas, Lee's attorney, stating "Lee had done nothing wrong, and would not be extorted or blackmailed."¹⁵ Lee argues that nothing good in the world would be the way it is without him, and he may not be wrong. However, his success would never have happened without the people that he erased and sometimes exploited to get where he was. It is important to remember the people who helped him create the empire that will forever bear his name.

Carry On

Lee believed in the power of comics to not only be able to reflect aspects of society, but to illuminate the future. When the Black Lives Matter movement began clashing with the police, Lee created a pin with two hands of different color shaking hands with the word "respect" because he believed in the inherent goodness of man, and hoped the pin would remind people that despite race or religion, we are all still people, and we should treat each other as such. It is lessons like these that echo in the depths of Marvel's

¹⁴ Rosie Knight, "The Tangled Web of Stan Lee's Legacy," *Esquire*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a25096722/stan-lee-death-legacy-controversy-lawsuits-sexual-harassment/>.

¹⁵ Angelina Walker, "Nurses Accuse Hollywood Icon Stan Lee of Sexual Harassment," January 10, 2018, nurse.org/articles/nurses-accuse-stan-lee-of-sexual-harrassment/.

comics and create a positive environment for children who need subtlety like that to slowly begin to understand all the complexities of the modern world. Although Lee never got to write his "Great American Novel," he came to a conclusion later on in life:

I used to be embarrassed because I was just a comic-book writer while other people were building bridges or going on to medical careers. And then I began to realize: entertainment is one of the most important things in people's lives. Without it, they might go off the deep end. I feel that if you're able to entertain, you're doing a good thing.¹⁶

Stanley Martin Lieber, lover of words, of books, of movies, of people. It does not have to be said that there will never be another man like him; that is an unequivocal certainty. He saw the good in humanity even though he grew up with every reason not to; an important lesson to learn today in a time when there are so many who are growing up as impoverished as he was. But he is also the light at the end of the tunnel, the proof that there is a way out. His relentless spirit made him a force to be reckoned with, and even though it got him in trouble more often than not, he did everything in his power to cement himself in the history books. No one can take away what Stan created, the legacy he left behind. His work is carried on by those who love and believe not just in comic book stories, but in the lessons they learned. Whether it was all an exaggeration to further his origin or the true tale of a man who came from nothing, he will be forever be remembered as a man who gave us everything.

¹⁶ Batchelor, *Stan Lee*, 190.

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Author Bio

Galilea Navarro would like to thank the editorial board and Dr. Murray for the opportunity to put her insomnia to good use. It has been an honor and a privilege writing for a group of hardworking people. She wants to dedicate this In Memoriam to the comic-book buffs, the movie buffs, the realists, the dreamers, the optimists, the pessimists, and everyone in between.



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