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JULY/AUGUST

WHALES WATCHING

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The Most Humane Sport

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HERBERT LIVESY:

Secrets of
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William S. Burroughs

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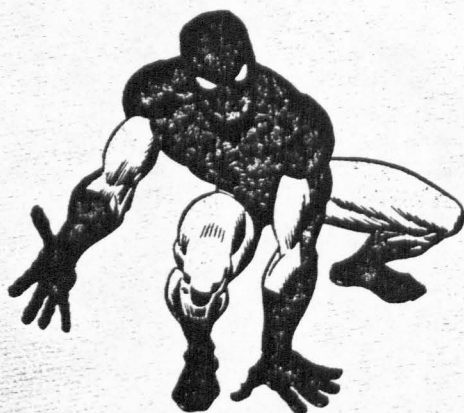
William Irwin Thompson

SCULPTURE
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HOW I INVENTED



SPIDER-MAN

Every comic book writer needs a smart wife

STAN LEE

In case you've been living outside the solar system, and therefore haven't heard of Spider-Man, let me introduce him as painlessly as possible. The Amazing Spider-Man, to use his full title, appears on the covers of six million comic books a year and plays starring roles in an additional 10 million. Beyond comic books, he shows up everywhere from toys to T-shirts to television. He's a celebrity not only in the United States but also in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Indochina, and most of South America. He is, in fact, the world's most popular fantasy hero—and the best-selling as well.

Now that we've more or less estab-

lished his fame, let's explore how it happened and, of far greater importance, what it all means—mainly in order to learn a little more about ourselves.

To that end, I've been asked to tell you something about the guy who reputedly started the whole thing—namely me.

Unlike most New Yorkers, who come from somewhere else, I was born right in the middle of Manhattan. I attended De Witt Clinton High School and, in my spare time, was a member of the Washington Heights branch of the WPA Federal Theatre. I loved acting. I was always a ham. But acting didn't pay the rent, and since my father was one of the legion of unemployed at that time, I had to set my greedy little sights elsewhere.

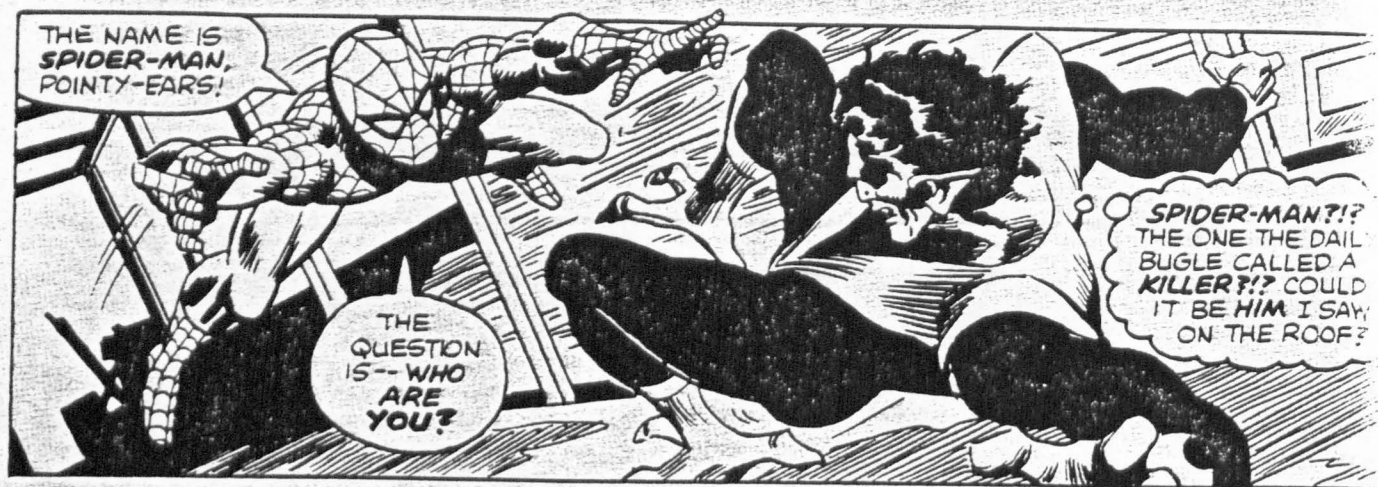
While completing my senior year in high school, I became the world's most inept theater usher, whose greatest claim to fame was showing Eleanor Roosevelt to a seat at the Rivoli Theatre and suffering the indignity of having her help me to my feet solicitously after I had tripped over someone's outstretched leg in the aisle with

the theater manager and half the nation's Secret Service force looking on. From that debacle, I went to a job writing obituaries of famous people for a news service, so they'd have the obit all ready to print when the notable finally went to his or her reward. I soon got depressed writing about living people in the past tense, so I abandoned what might have been the springboard for a glorious career in journalism. After other forgettable part-time stints, such as writing publicity releases for a hospital (I was never sure what I was supposed to publicize: "We'll cure you faster than other hospitals"? "Our doctors are safer than theirs"?), I reached the turning point of my 16½-year-old life.

In those days the New York *Herald-Tribune* ran a weekly essay contest open to all high school students. It was called "The Biggest News of the Week Contest," and the purpose was, as you'd expect, to write the most spell-binding essay in so many words or less on what you considered the most momentous news event of the past week. Either no one else was entering, or I was an embryonic Walter

STAN LEE
is the publisher of
Marvel Comics.

If you suddenly gained the muscle power of a hundred men and could outwrestle King Kong, it doesn't mean you still wouldn't have to worry about dandruff or acne, right?



Cronkite (probably the former), but I won three weeks in a row. One of the editors called to ask me to stop submitting entries and “give someone else a chance.” If I hadn’t yet made a life’s commitment, he said, I might consider becoming a writer.

At that point the long arm of coincidence took over. Within a matter of hours, I heard of a job opening at a comic book publishing company. In those days it was called Timely Comics. A “gofer” was needed to round out the tiny staff: a kid to do some proofreading, write copy, answer letters, and “gofer” the coffee and sandwiches. I applied and I got the job. Not long afterward, the editor and the head artist left and I was asked if I thought I could fill in as editor until the publisher could find someone else. I said sure. At the age of 17, I didn’t know any better. Apparently no one else was ever found, and I’ve been there ever since.

In the past three decades, I’ve held the titles Editor, Art Director, and Head Writer. Then, in 1972, I was named Publisher of what is now called Marvel Comics. Although I never made it as a thespian, I’ve found enough temperament, talent, and theatrics in the way-out world of comic books to make it all worthwhile.

Now back to Spider-Man and the events that led to his creation.

In their own simplistic way, comic books have usually mirrored the tenor of the times. In the late thirties and early

forties, colorful pulp heroes like Captain America and Captain Marvel almost single-handedly decimated the forces of fascism between the multicolored covers of their monthly magazines. After World War II, when the public was satiated with tales of diabolical dictators, the comic books turned to Westerns, crime, and monster stories. For a brief period in the early fifties, when the nation enjoyed an illusory hiatus between crises, the biggest-selling comics dealt with the innocuous antics of the animated animals created by Walt Disney, Paul Terry, Walter Lantz, and their ilk.

In 1961, something happened. For the first time within memory there seemed to be no special trend in the comic book field. No single title or group of titles seemed to excite the readers. Oh, they were still buying the comics—kids always will—but without any discernible enthusiasm. Even the superhero titles, long the staple of the industry, were declining in sales and apparently going nowhere.

At first blush, it didn’t make sense. Everyone said it was a time for heroes. The youth of America had been inspired by John Kennedy and the vision of Camelot; astronauts and cosmonauts performed incredible exploits as they raced for supremacy in space. It was a time for daring concepts, deeds far bigger than life—a time when comic book superheroes should have been selling better than ever. What was wrong?

Personally, I was bored. I had 20 years of writing and editing comics behind me. Twenty years of “Take that, you rat!” and “So, you wanna play, huh?” Twenty years of worrying whether a sentence or phrase might be over the head of an eight-year-old reader. Twenty years of trying to think like a child. And then an off-hand remark by my wife caused a revolution in comics tantamount to the invention of the wheel. Eighteen simple words, electrifying in their eloquence and their portent for the future. Each momentous syllable is engraved in my memory:

“When are you going to stop writing for kids and write stories that you yourself would enjoy reading?”

It was a casual question, posed in a casual way, but it really rocked me. It made me suddenly realize that I had never actually written anything for myself. For two unsatisfying decades I’d been selling myself short, sublimating any literary ability I might have in a painful effort to write down to the level of drooling juveniles and semicretins.

“Nevermore!” I shouted. “Nevermore will I fashion my tales for the nameless, faceless ‘them’ out there. Henceforth, I will write for an audience of one; an audience I should have no trouble pleasing, for I certainly know what turns *me* on.”

When the time came to create a teenaged hero for Marvel Comics, I decided to depict him as a bumbling,

real-life teenager who by some miracle had acquired a super power. He'd have to be bewildered, insecure, inept, ungainly, and often out of step with those around him. He'd be my kind of teenager. A loser. A schlepp. Just like I was when I was young. And I know if I had gotten a super power when I was a teenager, the only change would be—I'd simply have become a super-powered schlepp.

After all, who ever said that extra strength, or talent, or ability has to make a guy a winner? If you suddenly gained the muscle power of a hundred men, OK—so you'd be able to lift heavy weights and outwrestle King Kong; but that doesn't mean you still wouldn't have to worry about dandruff, or acne, or hemorrhoids, right? And suppose you could crawl on walls and ceilings like a human spider. Wouldn't you still be concerned about postnasal drip, or warts, or the heartbreak of psoriasis? Wouldn't you still have trouble balancing your checkbook, or scoring with a girl who

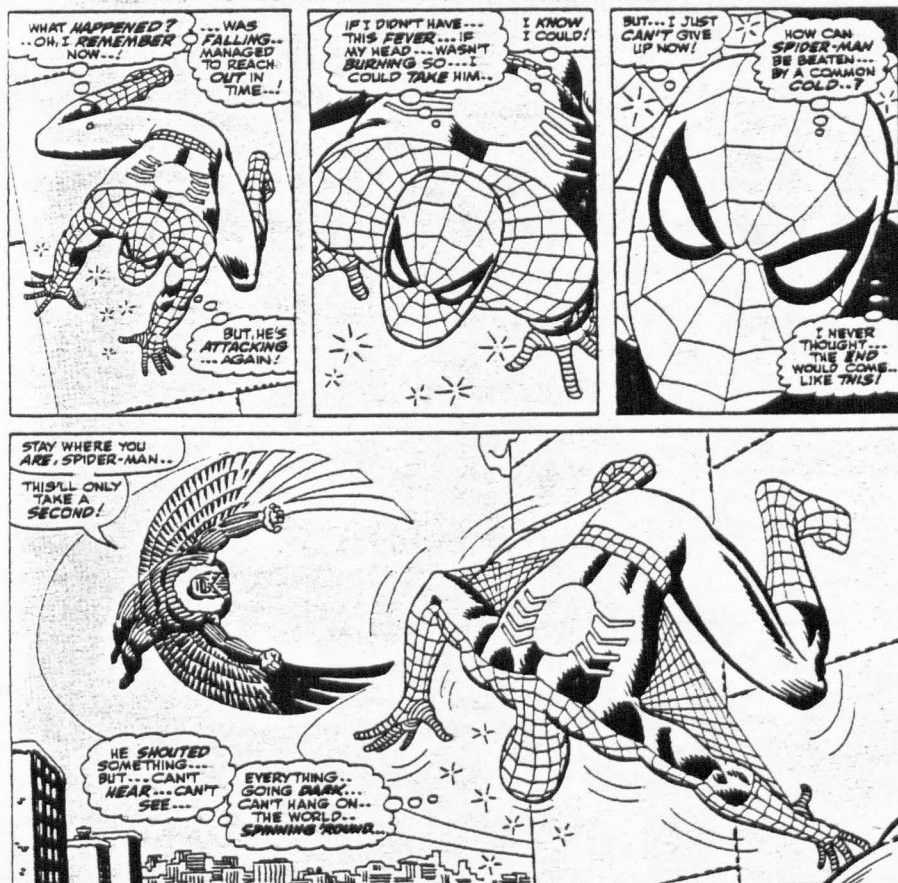
doesn't happen to dig costumed wall-crawlers?

The more I thought about it, the faster the ideas came to me. Sure, I was still writing comic book yarns about freaky, farfetched superheroes, but I suddenly realized I was beginning to enjoy it. An extra dimension had been added. I was now playing with characters like the Human Torch, a pushy extravert able to burst into flame and fly like a bird with his blazing lighter-than-air body; Mr. Fantastic, a stuffy, brilliant, egocentric scientist with the ability to stretch his body like a piece of elastic; the Thing, a monstrous being with a temper to match whose superhuman strength is exceeded only by his popularity with our fans; and the Invisible Girl, Mr. Fantastic's fiancée, whose chief claim to fame is exactly what her name implies. In addition to the Fantastic Four, who battle for truth, justice, and monetary compensation, there was the Incredible Hulk, the most powerful mortal on earth. His

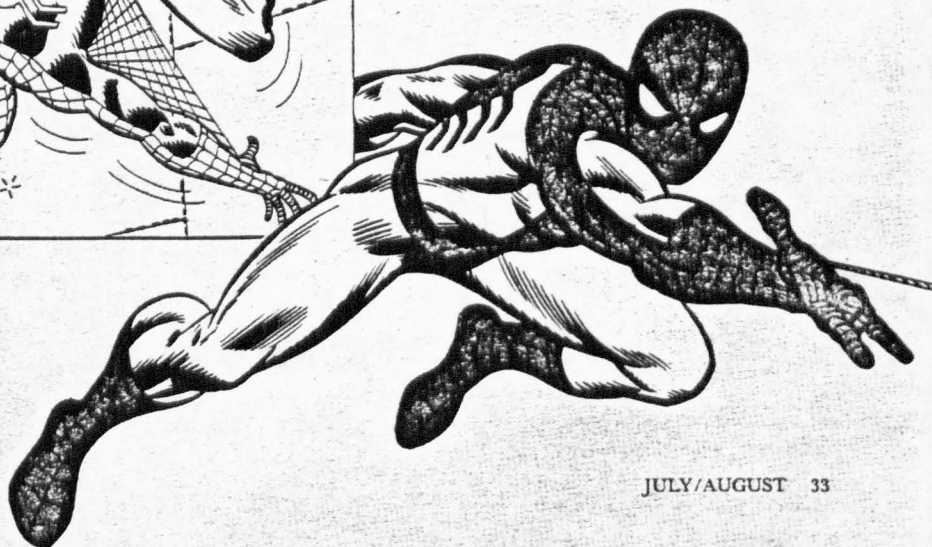
distinctions include a green skin and the fact that he weighs in at about 700 pounds. Improbable as they all sound, I was attempting to place these fantastic characters in the real world, trying to give them human traits and believable reactions, trying to combine fairy-tale concepts with down-to-earth reality, and the results really grabbed me. I was doing what Joanie had suggested. I was writing stories for myself, trying for the kind of off-beat, irreverent feeling that had always attracted me to Mark Twain, Bernard Shaw, and yes, Woody Allen.

But most of all I wanted to do Spider-Man.

When I was about 10 years old, I used to read a pulp magazine called *The Spider* and subtitled "Master of Men." Perhaps it was the Master of Men that got me, but to my impressionable, preteen way of thinking, the Spider was the most dramatic character I had ever encountered. He ranked right up there with Doc Savage and the Shadow. Even better, he wasn't as



What if Spider-Man, while fighting for his life against some deadly foe, were suddenly to be hit with an allergy attack?





well known as the others, which gave me the warm feeling that his fans belonged to an elite club. At any rate, in searching for a title for our newest superhero, I remembered my old pulp favorite—and the title Spider-Man instantly hit me. I didn't mind borrowing the Spider part of his name because everything else about our new character would be completely different. I was determined to make our next production the most original, most unique comic book character ever to swoop down the pike.

Even the man I chose to illustrate the web-spinner's adventures marked a departure from the usual superhero strip. Steve Ditko was as fine a draftsman and graphic continuity artist as one could find. Instead of depicting unreal creatures, with muscles bulging on muscles, Steve's characters looked like the guy next door. Where the average superhero strip was exaggerated and overblown, his artwork was low-key and understated. It was just what I wanted. It was vitally important to me that Spider-Man be the kind of character with whom any ordinary Joe could identify. I was certain that Steve's untypical, uncliché artwork would help.

The deeper I dug under Spidey's skin to see what made him tick, the more I realized how embarrassingly banal had been the comics of the past few decades in terms of characterization. The so-called good guys were always invincible, infallible, and totally triumphant at the end of each story. The bad guys were always dastardly, deadly, and irrevocably eradicated by the time the final curtain rang down. The good guys talked lyrically. The bad guys grunted. The good guys were pure at heart, proud, and passionately patriotic. The bad guys were cowards, cutthroats, and craven to the core. The heroes were one scant step removed from sainthood, while nary a villain had a single redeeming feature. Nonsense: I'll bet

that even Attila the Hun was good to his mother; Albert Schweitzer probably snored in his sleep.

And so another mighty Marvel concept was born. Our villains would no longer necessarily be the epitome of evil incarnate; our heroes had not only feet of clay, but kneecaps and thighbones as well.

But how could the reader learn what motivated them? After all, their dialogue was usually limited to "I've got to stop him before he captures Buckey," or "Great Scott! It's a creature from another planet!" The solution was obvious: give the reader a chance to get inside our characters' heads—emphasize cogitation as well as conversation. Those of you who are steeped in Marvel lore, who have faithfully followed the adventures of our amazing arachnid, how well you know our penchant for thought balloons wherever we have the slightest millimeter of empty space within a panel. Our characters soliloquize enough to make Hamlet seem like a raging extravert. Never before have comic books exhibited such interminable soul-searching; such agonizing reappraisals on the part of hero and villain alike; such a dogged quest for truth, understanding, and basic motivation, even while Spider-Man is getting his lumps.

What if Spidey has to rush out at midnight to don his hidden costume and save mankind, but his Aunt May won't let him because a snowstorm is pending and he's just getting over a cold?

Thus, for the first time, comic book stories began to be written with the same concern for human speech and characterization as movies, novels, and plays. I'm not trying to imply that the end result would have made Ibsen jealous. We were still writing for a mass market and grinding out dozens of pages a day. But we were trying—and we were on our way.

There were plenty of voices of doom out there. I can't tell you how many times I heard, from those who were "older, wiser, and we've been in the business far longer than you," how my innocent little crusade to upgrade comic books would bring about the

total collapse of our valiant little company, if not the entire industry itself. I can still hear the voices—wise, persuasive, and unrelenting...

"Are you out of your mind? Comics are for kids. For little kids!"

"You can't produce comic books to suit your own tastes. You'll lose your entire audience!"

"They just wanna look at the pictures. Give 'em anything that requires real reading and you've had it!"

"Don't ruin what we've got going here. Don't be a jerk and mess up a good thing!"

We managed to stick to our guns. We kept writing and drawing Spider-Man stories that featured surprisingly realistic situations, carefully contrived motivation, and the sharpest dialogue I could invent. One of my favorite devices was the old "What if...?" ploy. What if Spider-Man, while fighting for his life against some deadly foe, is suddenly hit with an allergy attack? What if he has to rush out at midnight to don his hidden costume and save mankind, but his Aunt May won't let him go because of an impending snowstorm and he's just getting over a cold? What if Spidey receives a huge check as a reward for apprehending some deadly dastard, but he can't cash the check because it's made payable to Spider-Man, and he has no bank account under that name, nor does he have any way of identifying himself without revealing his secret identity? For the first time in years, comic books began to amuse me again.

After the first few stories of this type, I felt I really knew our friendly neighborhood web-spinner. Referring to him as Spidey seemed as natural to me as calling my wife Joanie. Writing his dialogue was ridiculously easy; I simply let him speak exactly as I would. Talk about empathy! Whenever Spidey was in a tight spot, I'd only have to think of what I would say or do in the same predicament, and presto—I had my dialogue as well as my course of action. But I've always tried to keep it in the right perspective. I've never personally attempted to shinny up a wall or cling to the nearest ceiling.

But what about the readers? What sort of impact did the widely heralded (mostly by us) "Marvel style" have on the hard-to-please hordes of Spider-dom Assembled? I'm glad you asked.

The Amazing Spider-Man first went

on sale early in 1963. Prior to that time we were selling about 17 million comic books a year. In 1964, spearheaded by Spidey's phenomenal popularity, we sold 28 million. By 1968 we were selling 49 million copies per year. Last year, still led by Spider-Man as our flagship character, Marvel Comics sold more than 70 million comic books and our sales are still growing. Throughout the world, Spidey outsells even Superman by about 800,000 copies per year.

Our cast of characters soliloquize enough to make Hamlet seem like a raging extravert.

To me, the most gratifying result of our new approach was a startling change in the comic book audience. The age range of our readers—previously six to about 13—suddenly zoomed to college age and beyond. In fact, the additional sales were coming mainly from older readers, and the beauty of it was that we were gaining those older readers without losing the younger ones.

It seems that *Spider-Man* and other Marvel Comics titles were being accepted and enjoyed on two levels. For the younger reader, there were colorful costumes, action, excitement, fantasy, and bigger-than-life adventures. For the newly proselytized older reader, we offered unexpectedly sophisticated plots and subplots, a college-level vocabulary, satire, science fiction, and as many philosophical and sociological concepts as we could devise. In the beginning, the satire wasn't completely intentional. I merely tried to imagine what would happen if someone with superhuman power really existed, and if he dwelled—for example—in Forest Hills, New York. Then I tried to confront him with real-life situations and problems. I thought I was being realistic; older readers thought I was waxing satirical. If they called it satire, who was I to contradict them?

I was also delighted to discover that our younger readers were not turned off by the college-level vocabulary we were dishing out. They seemed to absorb the meaning of words like cataclysmic, misanthropic, subliminal, phantasmagoric. We actually received hundreds of letters from bewildered parents telling us that

"Johnny's reading ability has improved 100 percent, as has his schoolwork—especially grammar and composition—since reading Marvel Comics!"

For the past decade, I've traveled around the country extolling the virtues of Spidermania on the campuses of virtually every college and university from Portland to Phoenix, from Seattle to Sarasota. You'd be amazed at the range of queries that have been flung at me, questions ranging from "How can Spider-Man see through those obviously opaque eye panels in his mask?" to "Philosophically, how do you equate Spidey's guilt syndrome with his hyperneurotic extraversion and manic-depressive tendencies?" And I'm not even laying the tough ones on you!

Beyond grownup language and drawing, there seems to be something about Peter Parker and his costumed alter ego that mesmerizes his millions of admirers, including myself. Let me venture a theory as to why Spider-Man has enjoyed such a vast and ever-growing popularity all these years.

It's a pretty safe bet that you and I have one thing in common with the whole human race. Cute, cuddly, and captivating though we may be, we all possess a certain degree of rottenness—just enough to make us interesting. We may be genuinely fond of our friends; we may respect and admire any number of people, wishing them success in all their endeavors; and yet, we never quite want them to succeed too much. If a close friend or relative does well, you rejoice for him. But if he does an awful lot better than you, it wouldn't really break your heart to have him stumble once in a while. We never really want anyone to be too much better, richer, handsomer, smarter, sexier, or luckier than we are. Not too much. In fact, if a loved one can be something of a loser now and then, it's usually a lot easier

for that love to flourish and grow. Nothing breeds genuine, long-lasting affection as much as the knowledge that the recipient is just a teensy bit—just slightly, mind you, just the merest soupçon—inferior to you!

Well, that's how it is with Spider-Man. For all his power, brains, and fame, the poor kid has far more problems, far more hang-ups than a sterling soul like you. As you read his weird and wondrous adventures, even as you thrill to his superhuman prowess, you find yourself pitying the guy, sympathizing with anyone who can have as many tough breaks and as much crummy luck as he does. Sure, he's a superhero. Sure, he's a regular one-man army. Sure, he's practically indestructible. But you're a lot better off. You seem to handle life's little vicissitudes far better than he can. Even though he's a living legend, you can feel superior to him. Now, how can you help but love a guy like that?

And perhaps, when all is said and done, that's what Spider-Man is telling us about ourselves and our time. Even though it is fashionable to lament our lack of heroes—the vanishing of our Joe DiMaggios or Winston Churchills—it's just possible that the day of the bigger-than-life hero is gone forever. We've grown too sophisticated. We've become too cynical. The events of the past few decades have made us suspicious, have made us distrust our leading citizens, our public figures, our politicians. Whatever happened to the time when we could refer to a politician as a statesman without feeling foolish?

All our Vietnams, Kent States, and Watergates have taken their toll. It's not that we don't want heroes. It's not that we don't search for someone to emulate, to admire, to idolize. But until the shock waves of our recent past have worn off, and we're finally ready and able to believe once again, our heroes will have to be fashioned of a different mold. They'll be flaky, fallible, and fault-ridden. They'll be no better or worse than we ourselves. We've endured too much. We won't let ourselves be hurt anymore.

So here's to Spider-Man. Here's to the new breed of superhero. He'll never disillusion us because we'll never expect too much from him. We can understand him and sympathize with him. If his powers are greater than ours, so are his problems. He's our kind of guy.

Stan Lee

