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# Stan Lee

## An outspoken interview with 'The Man' from Marvel

By John Weber

**JW:** Let's start with the wedding of Spider-Man and Mary Jane Watson. I understand that was your idea?

**SL:** Yeah, I've been writing Spider-Man for 25 years now and I've been doing the newspaper strip since it started eight years ago or nine years ago, whatever it is, and I think it's about time that this guy ends his single situation and becomes married, mainly because I'm trying to find something new to excite me about the strip. You know, after I've been writing something for so many years, the only way I ever feel I can write something good is if I'm interested in it myself. So I always think, 'What would I like to read?' And one day I woke up and I said I would like to read the adventures of the married super-hero. I don't know of any. You know, what would it be like to be a super-hero and have a wife? You want to go out and save the world and your wife says, "You've gotta come home, we have a bridge game tonight." So I think there would be all new problems that I haven't written about before if he becomes married and it's going to be fun to find out.

**JW:** What about Reed and Sue [of *The Fantastic Four*]?

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**'They're gonna go back to Spider-Man's old uniform in the comic book.'**

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**SL:** That's a little bit different because they're part of a group, you know, and in a group you can have any sort of combination of things. But a super-hero who's all by himself who gets married I think is going to be a totally different thing.

**JW:** So this isn't the end of Peter Parker's problems, I take it. Peter isn't going to live happily ever after, just with a whole new set of insecurities and problems.

**SL:** Absolutely. Heroes *never* live happily ever after. I would think he'll have more problems than he's ever had before. But they'll be different. I hope. I don't know what they'll be specifically, 'cause I never really know what I'm gonna do because if I know what I'm gonna do, then I'm bored writing the stories. It's more fun wondering what's gonna happen as I write the story.

**JW:** How tough has it been to coordinate this with the comic book and the newspaper strip? For instance, the comic book used one uniform, the newspa-

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per strip used the other uniform, the old uniform.

**SL:** Well, they're gonna go back to the old uniform in the comic book. It isn't tough at all to coordinate it because I *don't* coordinate it. I just write my script as though there is no comic book, and they do the comic book as if there is no strip. It's too difficult. You see, the reason it would be too difficult is the time frame. I do two or three panels a day, and they do about four books using Spider-Man every month. There's no way they could be in synch with what I'm doing. So we all decided the easiest thing is — there's two the newspaper, and the one in the books, and we let it go at that.

**JW:** Let's take one average storyline. How much newspaper time do you get out of that one storyline?

**SL:** Much more than anybody else. Most newspaper strips like *Mandrake* or *The Phantom* or whatever else — there are so few adventure strips it's hard to even think of any names — they last about 13 weeks. Thirteen weeks, for some reason, seems to be the time that newspaper syndicates like to have a story running. Mine could run for six months, seven months. I just keep writing — as I say, the only test with me is when I'm starting to get bored or when I think, "Well, let's end this and get on to something else." So, as long as I can come up with ideas that I think are interesting or surprising or stimulating, I stay with a storyline. The minute I say, "That's it! I wanna wrap this up," I wrap it up.

Another reason that mine run longer than anybody else's — writing for me is rather easy: I like to write, it comes easily. But dreaming up the plots — while that's easy, too, it's very time-consuming. I've got to take a whole day and sit somewhere and say, "Well, who will the villain be, what will the problem be, how will it get resolved, what situations will come up leading up to the end?" and so forth.

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**'My mother used to say that when I sat and ate lunch or something, I had to have a book in front of me and, if I didn't have a book, I'd read the label on the ketchup bottle while I was eating. I just love reading.'**

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You have to work it out, as you can imagine. The longer each installment runs, the fewer new plots I have to dream up. So that's another reason I keep it running for a while. Also, it gives me a chance, I think, to get more of the human quality into the strip than any other strip.

I used to be the same way with the comic books. I would rather take a very thin, skimpy plot and expand on it, and have a lot of panels showing what the characters are thinking, putting a lot of details into their lives, rather than the villain commits a crime, the hero chases him, they have a fight, you know, and you make sure it's enclosed within a small area. But I'd rather get into all of the personality, all the characterization that I can. And that lengthens the story tremendously.

**JW:** What did you read growing up?

**SL:** Everything. I was a voracious reader.  
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cious reader. I read Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, I read Dumas, Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, things like that. I read Mark Twain — I loved Mark Twain. I loved Shakespeare. I didn't understand him that well when I was young, but I loved the music of the language. I used to remember passages of Shakespeare where I wasn't quite sure what he was saying. Like there's a line, "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?" I loved to read. My mother used to say that when I sat and ate lunch or something, I had to have a book in front of me and, if I didn't have a book around, I'd read the label on the ketchup bottle while I was eating.

I just love reading. Jules Verne. I like imaginative things. One of my favorites was Sherlock Holmes. I loved Sherlock Holmes because I felt he really existed. Conan Doyle wrote so realistically, and that's what I try to do with Spider-Man and my characters. I felt if you could take a fictional character and make him seem real to a reader, that's the crowning achievement for a writer. I remember when I read *Les Misérables*, I mean I knew Jean Valjean, I worried about him when he carried Cosette through those sewers, and I was there with him! When you can believe in the characters — I mean, I was sure there was a Tarzan!

**JW:** Have you ever had the ambition to write a novel — outside of super-heroes and the like?

**SL:** I would love to — I just never get the time. As you can imagine, I would have to take a few months off to do it. I seem to keep so busy with so many projects. My wife — who never wrote professionally in her life, who's my age — my wife a few years ago decided to write a

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novel, she wrote one, sold it to Dell Publishing, it's coming out this winter, she's three-quarters of the way through her second one, it's the most incredible thing! I'll be known as Mr. Joan Lee one day. But I haven't gotten around to it yet.

**JW:** You've been a great influence.

**SL:** Maybe (chuckle).

**JW:** Now back to the wedding for a little bit. How much outside media coverage is Spider-Man's wedding getting?

**SL:** Tremendous! I understand that *Newsweek* magazine will be there [at Shea Stadium June 5 for a home plate wedding before the Mets-Pirates game], the Associated Press, UPI, the *New York Times* will cover it. *Good Morning America* is going to have an interview with me. Spider-Man getting married, it's bigger than nuclear proliferation!

**JW:** Comics in the last few years are getting all sorts of outside attention, for *Dark Knight*, the Superman revamping, now this. When you were writing and creating, you were just recognized by the people who bought them. Do you feel you've missed out on something?

**SL:** I often think I got out of the business at the wrong time. See, when we started, comics were nothing. In fact, I'd meet people at cocktail parties and they'd ask me what I do, and I never wanted to say I wrote comics because they'd walk

away. So I'd say I'm a writer. Then they'd say "What do you write?" I'd say "Stories in magazines." "What kind of magazines?" "Well, for young people." "Yeah, but what kind of magazines?" At some point I had to say "Comics." "Oh. Excuse me, there's somebody over there I want to talk to."

Little by little, I think we were lucky with Marvel Comics. We were able to increase the age of our readership more and more. By the time about seven or eight or ten years ago that I stopped doing the comic books, we were just starting to get some recognition. See, what's gonna happen: Comic books will be one day accepted as a viable, valid art form. If Michaelangelo and Shakespeare were alive today, and they got together and said, "Hey, let's collaborate and do a comic strip," who in the world would say, "Ehhh, that's just a comic, that's not worth much"? I

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mean it would be obviously be the greatest artwork and the greatest writing you could find.

So there's nothing wrong with comics, it's a means of telling stories through words and pictures. It just depends on who does them and how they're done. And people are beginning to learn that now. Something like *Dark Knight*, which might have been written a bit better and more dramatically and cinematically than Batman had been for a while. It creates attention.

Eventually, comics will be done the way they're done in Europe — in hardcover and sold in bookstores. If they're bad, people will say, "I didn't like that one," and if they're good, they'll receive as much attention as any other form of literary endeavor.

**JW:** This is a personal thought of mine. Comics are entering the mainstream, but still, articles mention the "Zap, Pow, Wham" everytime they mention comics, right from the *Batman* TV series. Has that affected comics being taken seriously?

**SL:** I don't think it did comics any good, no. It held them up to ridicule, it was almost like saying, "Look how silly these things are." It made a lot of money for the producer. But it wasn't a bad series. For what it was, it was very entertaining. I guess nothing is really bad if it's well done. And it was well-done.

I don't think it hurts comics. The only things that will hurt comics are the only things that will hurt novels or movies or television or ballet or opera or anything: things within that medium that are not done well. People crave entertainment.

People, especially young men, have always loved fantasy. Comics today, the super-hero comics, are one of the best providers of fantasy. You know, where else can you get fairy tales for grown-ups other than the comics? Occasionally, George Lucas or [Steven] Spielberg do a movie, but there's so little of that. You can buy a science-fiction magazine, or science-fiction novel, and those are great, but very often they're a little too heavy, and comics are probably the most enjoyable way to read a fantasy story.

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In my mind, there's nothing wrong with pictures accompanying words. You're still reading. But it's like parents will sometimes say, "I don't want Johnny to read comics because he doesn't use his imagination." That's a little silly. You don't say that if you go to a Broadway show. You don't say "I don't want to go to the show because I see it on the stage, I'm just gonna read the script of the play." You don't say that about a good movie, "I don't wanna go to the movie because there are pictures on the screen." It's the same thing. There's nothing wrong with words and pictures. It's probably one of the most enjoyable ways of getting a story. And there's certainly nothing wrong with reading a story without pictures. As I said, I was one of the most avid readers that I know of years ago, and I still am. But one thing doesn't necessarily negate the other thing. They all have a place. Anything that imparts information enjoyably, I think, is worthwhile.

**JW:** Let's talk about the proposed rating-labeling system for comics that has people in the industry in an uproar. You've been on both sides, as a writer, creator, publisher, editor. How do you feel about it?

**SL:** Well, I'll probably make a lot of enemies by saying this. It doesn't bother me at all. I don't know what all the fuss is about. I could live with ratings, without ratings. I never would have said, "Let's do it," but if they wanna do it, what's so bad about it? Motion pictures are rated. I've heard the word censorship banded about — I don't see that it's censorship. You do any story you want. After you've done it, they decide, is it an R? A PG?

**JW:** Does having that labeling affect the way you write?

**SL:** It doesn't affect the way I write.

**JW:** Let's say I want something to go to a general audience.

**SL:** Then you should damn well write for a general audience! I think a writer has an obligation. I think when you're writing for kids, you have an obligation to use some discretion. I don't think that's censorship — I think that's a matter of taste. Now you may not agree with the rating — you may feel the guys who are rating it are idiots. That could happen.

I've never been much of a crusader in those areas. I'm a very malleable guy and I can work under any set of rules if I have to. I didn't like the idea of the Comics Code coming in when it did, but I saw the reason for it. I wouldn't have written any different stories, even if there hadn't been a Code. I, personally, have no intention of getting very sexy or very violent in anything I do. I don't think it's necessary. And as long as I feel some young people read what I write, I'm sure as hell going to try to exercise taste. If someone wants to label it, you know, let them label it if they want to.

By the same token, I respect other people's opinion. If they decide not to use the rating system, let them not use it. I'm not involved in it any more because I've been away from the comics. All I can say honestly is I really am not sure. Maybe it's because I haven't looked into it enough. Maybe if I spoke to some of the guys, I'd find out that they had very real and valid reasons for being upset. But, at this moment, I don't know why anyone is upset.

**Next:** Stan Lee gives his views on violence in comic books, Jim Shooter, and other topics and reveals some of Marvel's upcoming movie and television projects.