EDUCATION GUIDE

BY PETER ROYSTON

WELCOME TO SPIDER-MAN TURN OFF THE DARK

Listen. Let me tell you a story.

A boy is bitten by a spider and gains its powers: its strength, agility, its ability to scale walls and swing on webs through the air.

At first, the boy revels in this new power and uses his talents for selfish ends. He cares nothing for the world around him, only for himself.

But after a great tragedy, he makes the choice to use his powers to fight evil. Although the world shuns him, he battles injustice wherever he sees it.

An ancient myth, told around a fire? A folk-tale passed down from generation to generation? No…and yes! When writer Stan Lee and artist Steve Ditko created the comic book superhero Spider-Man in 1962, they tapped into ideas that had run through stories and mythology since the dawn of time: human beings granted the powers of animals, the place of the Hero in society, and, most important, the nature of Power and Responsibility. They created a character and a story that have stood strong for more than thirty years in comic books, comic strips, novels, animated cartoons and feature films.

Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark has many elements that will be exciting for young people: an adventure story with science fiction elements, a coming-of-age story, a story of young love, and, most important, a story of responsibility.

Peter Parker is a young man who is granted the gift (or is it a curse?) of the spider's powers: to swing from webs, strength, speed, agility. He is told by his Uncle that "with great power comes great responsibility."

But Uncle Ben's warning is not about having super powers; he never learns of his nephew's special gifts. He's talking about the power within us all to change things for the better. All young people have "power": they all have talents and potential to shape their futures and their world. How young people use their talents, their voices, their "powers," and how they see their responsibility to their communities and the world, is a major theme of *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*.

These days, it's very easy to lose hope, to feel that you are powerless and things are hopeless. The message of *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark* is that we can make change, that we can use our "powers," whatever they may be, to overcome obstacles and make a difference in other peoples' lives.

TAKING ON RESPONSIBILITY

What is responsibility? Who, or what, are we responsible for? How are we responsible for each other? What "threads" or "webs" join us together?

Responsibility is a vital theme throughout *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*. Peter Parker gains extraordinary powers and begins to use them for himself. Peter never wants to be Spider-Man; he never asks to be a hero. He only wants what we all want: to have success, to be loved, to be comfortable and safe.

It's only when his selfishness leads to his beloved uncle's death that he realizes the truth in what Uncle Ben told him: that having powers and talents mean using them to better the world, to help others.

In *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*, tragedy occurs when Peter takes a step back and refuses to act. An old saying goes, "All it takes for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing." Or as Peter Sanderson writes in Marvel Universe, "Spider-Man has repeatedly questioned his own mission, but he always comes back to the question of his own responsibility to the world. To allow wrongdoing to occur is, in Spider-Man's mind, to be part of it."

It takes courage to be responsible. We think of courage as grand and heroic, but sometimes being courageous just means doing the right thing. As we see in *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*, doing the right thing can be hard.

Responsibility carries with it the obligation of being proactive: of doing the right thing, achieving things to fulfill our responsibilities and goals. If we would all live our lives in responsible ways, real change could take place; we would not need to rely on governments or corporations to take control; we would be able to make change ourselves.

Young people in the United States and around the world are beginning to embrace a culture of responsibility. From the Servicenation Coalition to the Responsibility Project, from City Year to Locks of Love, young people are discovering the satisfactions of service – to family, school, community or nation. Young people are discovering that their "powers" – their voices, actions and behaviors – can change the world.

IT'S A QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT IS RESPONSIBILITY TO YOU?

What does responsibility mean to you? Working in a group, arrive at your own definition of responsibility.

1. Each member of the group or class should answer the following questions on their own, working in private.

To me, responsibility means _____

When I show responsibility, this is how I feel: _____

When I avoid responsibility, this is how I feel: _____

Here are three ways I can become a more responsible person:

A. _____

_____

B. _____

_____

C. _____

_____

2. Read your answers out loud; compare your answers with the other members of your class or group.

3. Combine your definitions to come up with a class-wide definition of responsibility. How does your definition compare with the dictionary definition?

4. Once you have agreed on a definition of responsibility, use it to create a code of conduct for your class. A code of conduct is a set of expectations on the behavior of members of a group.

WEBS:

Expand your definition of responsibility outward: What is your responsibility as a student? As a friend? As a human being? What is your responsibility to your class? Your school? Your town? State or country? Your world?

TURN OFF THE DARK: MAKE THE HERO CONNECTION!

Get involved! In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama called responsibility "the price and the promise of citizenship." Being responsible is a verb, it's DOING the right thing, not waiting around for the right thing to happen! We all have "powers" – talents and traits that make us special. We can choose to use these powers to help others or let them go to waste. What is your "power"? How can you use your power to help people? How can you make the Hero Connection?

Spider-Man takes on obstacles by himself, but groups can be heroes, too. People can often overcome obstacles by working together. How can an organization or a community be a hero? How about a class?

Work with your class or group to "turn off the dark" somewhere in your community; identify a problem and work to fix it!

1. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

Time to brainstorm! Discuss problems in your community that need to be solved, or an obstacle that needs to be overcome. Or, if you'd rather, each student can write down an idea on a slip of paper and ideas can be discussed anonymously.

Once the problem has been identified, discuss the questions that need to be considered before getting to work.

2. SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT!

How can you use your "powers" or your talents to bring about change? What can you do to attract attention to the spotlight on the problem you've chosen? Here are some suggestions:

- Panel discussions: Invite experts and lawmakers to speak about your issue
- Letters to the editor
- Letters and/or articles in your school newspaper/web site/ local access TV
- Prepare your own newspaper or newsletter about the issue
- Create a "museum" based on your issue, with items, posters, art work, video installations
- Lobbying – get the word out to your lawmakers
- Organize: rallies, meetings, panel discussion, boycotts
- Radio broadcasts or approved announcements over the public address system in your school
- Create a web site or YouTube video about your issue (with adult supervision)

3. GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY!

Get to work! Creating a volunteer project in your community that can see a beginning, middle and completion can be very satisfying. Here are some suggestions; maybe they will spark some ideas about problems that need fixing in your school or community:

- Park, river or beach clean up
- Recycling drive
- Host a food drive
- Gathering food, clothes or other necessary items for disaster victims
- Host a painting party to repaint old homes
- Planting trees, flowers and shrubs and landscaping materials

4. RECORD AND ASSESS

As you begin your "Turn Off The Dark" project, assign someone the job of recording secretary. It will be their job to create a log or journal during the process to gauge the success of the undertaking, so that others can learn from your successes and mistakes. How can you be responsible as a group? How was the action successful? What could have been done better?

THE SPIDER IN MYTHOLOGY and FOLKLORE

Spiders have woven their webs through myths and stories from cultures around the world. Here are just a few:

THE SPIDER WOMAN: Many Native American cultures tell of the Spider Woman, who created the first human beings, and taught them many important skills, including weaving. As a matter of fact, it was a Navajo tradition to rub a spider web onto a baby girl's arm, so that she would absorb the spider's skill and become a great weaver.

THE SPIDER MAN: Sioux legends sang of Iktome, the Spider Man, a mischievous trickster god who would fool authority figures in wildly inappropriate ways.

ANANSI: African and Caribbean stories tell of Anansi the trickster spider, most clever of all the beings in creation, who, after winning a bet with the gods, owned all the world's stories, and shared them with people. The story of Anansi is believed to have begun with the Ashanti people of Ghana in Africa. The stories of Anansi proved to be popular and so wide-spread that they became known as "Anansesem," or "spider tales."

CAT'S CRADLE: The Navajo people believed that the game Cat's Cradle, which we still play today, was a gift of the Spider people. The spiders taught the Navajo to play the game with the condition that they would only play it during the winter time, when spiders were sleeping. If the game was played during the warm months, disaster would occur.

WATER SPIDER: The Cherokee American Indians believed that in the beginning of time, there was no fire and the world was cold and wet. All the animals tried to get fire from the Thunders (beings who hoarded fire), but came back scorched. Only the Water Spider was able to spin her thread into a bowl to gather some fire coals and bring them back to a grateful world.

ROBERT THE BRUCE: A Scottish legend tells of King Robert the Bruce who, when in hiding after many military losses against the English, saw a spider trying to climb up its web, falling back but always trying, again and again. Inspired by the spider's perseverance, Bruce came out of hiding and led his forces to victory.

WEBS

- Discuss how spiders are portrayed in literature, movies and other media today (for example, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, spiders in both the Harry Potter stories and *The Lord of the Rings*)
- Why do you think that spiders were often linked with creativity in legend and myth?
- How is *Spider-Man Turn Off the Dark* a modern "spider tale"?

SPIDER SUPERSTITIONS

If a spider falls down in front of you, you will get a present (Polynesia)

If a spider creates a web across a doorway, expect company (U.S.A.)

A spider seen in the morning: grief; a spider seen at noon: joy; a spider seen at night: hope (an old French proverb)

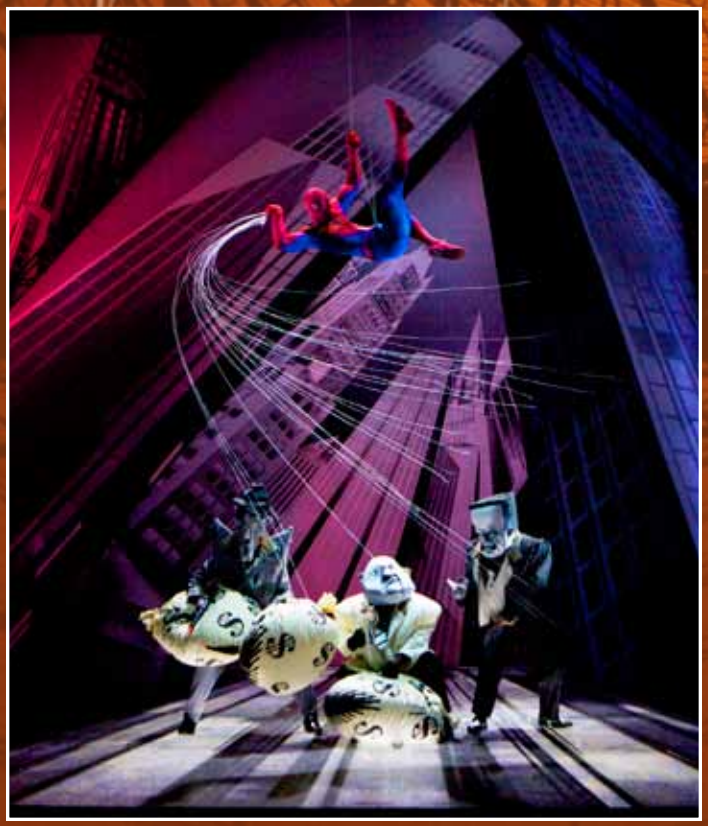
COMIC BOOKS: A TRUE AMERICAN ART FORM

"If there's such a thing as a golden age of comics, it's happening right now."

- from *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* by Douglas Wolk

Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark takes the two-dimensional comic book page and blasts it into a three-dimensional spectacle happening LIVE right in front of your eyes! But comic art is hardly flat or static. The comic art form has been called "movies on the page." By arranging images in a sequence (usually in boxes called "panels"), one after the other, comics can create the illusion of movement and time passing. It's up to the reader to use his or her imagination to "fill in the blanks" between the actions shown in each panel, creating the full reality in their heads.

No wonder the most popular genre that uses the comic art form is superhero stories like Spider-Man; comics can give us a breathtaking illusion of power, speed and motion that is perfect for superhero stories. But comics don't have to be only about superheroes, just as "movies" don't have to only be action films, or "novels" don't only have to be romance tales. Comics is an art form or a medium, and like other art forms, it can hold many different styles and genres, from history to humor, from horror to biography. As Jessica Abel and Matt Madden write in *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: Making Comics: Manga, Graphic Novels, and Beyond*, comics is "a container for ideas."



A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF COMIC BOOKS

The Origins of Comic Books

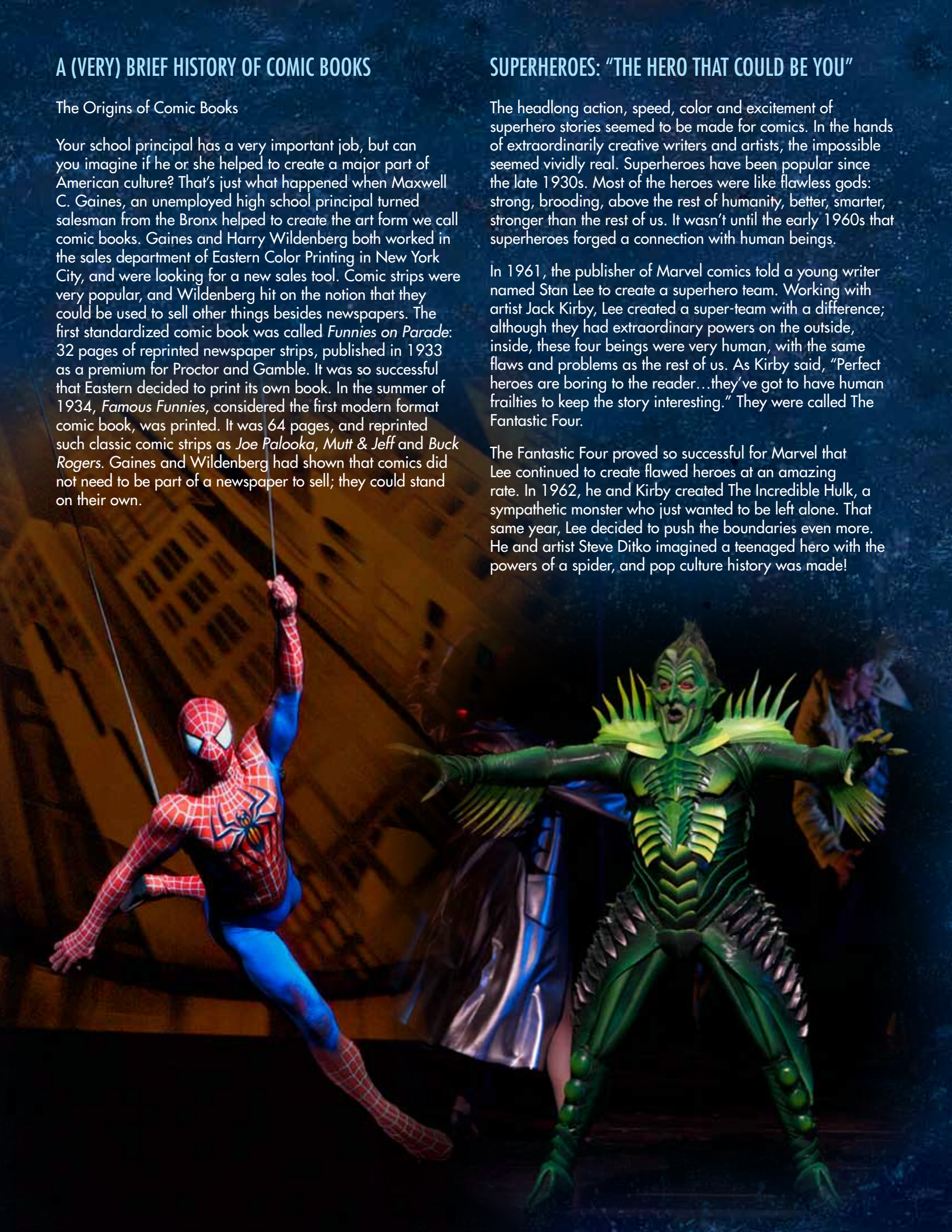
Your school principal has a very important job, but can you imagine if he or she helped to create a major part of American culture? That's just what happened when Maxwell C. Gaines, an unemployed high school principal turned salesman from the Bronx helped to create the art form we call comic books. Gaines and Harry Wildenberg both worked in the sales department of Eastern Color Printing in New York City, and were looking for a new sales tool. Comic strips were very popular, and Wildenberg hit on the notion that they could be used to sell other things besides newspapers. The first standardized comic book was called *Funnies on Parade*: 32 pages of reprinted newspaper strips, published in 1933 as a premium for Proctor and Gamble. It was so successful that Eastern decided to print its own book. In the summer of 1934, *Famous Funnies*, considered the first modern format comic book, was printed. It was 64 pages, and reprinted such classic comic strips as *Joe Palooka*, *Mutt & Jeff* and *Buck Rogers*. Gaines and Wildenberg had shown that comics did not need to be part of a newspaper to sell; they could stand on their own.

SUPERHEROES: "THE HERO THAT COULD BE YOU"

The headlong action, speed, color and excitement of superhero stories seemed to be made for comics. In the hands of extraordinarily creative writers and artists, the impossible seemed vividly real. Superheroes have been popular since the late 1930s. Most of the heroes were like flawless gods: strong, brooding, above the rest of humanity, better, smarter, stronger than the rest of us. It wasn't until the early 1960s that superheroes forged a connection with human beings.

In 1961, the publisher of Marvel comics told a young writer named Stan Lee to create a superhero team. Working with artist Jack Kirby, Lee created a super-team with a difference; although they had extraordinary powers on the outside, inside, these four beings were very human, with the same flaws and problems as the rest of us. As Kirby said, "Perfect heroes are boring to the reader…they've got to have human frailties to keep the story interesting." They were called The Fantastic Four.

The Fantastic Four proved so successful for Marvel that Lee continued to create flawed heroes at an amazing rate. In 1962, he and Kirby created The Incredible Hulk, a sympathetic monster who just wanted to be left alone. That same year, Lee decided to push the boundaries even more. He and artist Steve Ditko imagined a teenaged hero with the powers of a spider, and pop culture history was made!



HERE COMES THE SPIDER-MAN

"Like costumed heroes? Confidentially, we in the comic mag business refer to them as 'long underwear characters'! And, as you know, they're a dime a dozen! But, we think you may find our *Spider-Man* just a bit...different!"

– from *Amazing Fantasy* #15, 1962

Spider-Man first appeared in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 during the summer of 1962. From the beginning, this was a new type of hero. Before Spider-Man, superheroes were mostly adults, but Peter Parker was only 15 years old when he was first bitten by the spider. Closer in age to the readers, this young hero had all the problems that a young reader could identify with: Peter Parker had to deal with love, death, money, and later, even the dangers of drug abuse in his friends. "Up until then," said Lee, "superheroes didn't really have problems. They only had one problem, and that was how to beat up every villain. I wasn't interested in writing stories like that."

For Edge, one of the composers of *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*, comic books were an important part of growing up: "In many ways, the audience for a rock and roll band and the audience for a comic book are the same – it's kids like ourselves, you know, 15-16, out in the suburbs – in our case, of Dublin City – but it could be any city in America or Europe. You know, it's like it seems at that moment in your life that there's this world out there that you just can't get across to and the only way you can connect with it is through music or comic books…Comic books were alongside rock and roll."

Jack Kirby had been slated to do the art on *Spider-Man*, but Lee felt that Kirby made the hero too muscular. "I didn't want this character to look like your usual superhero. I just wanted him to be a shy teenager, who wasn't too handsome," said Stan Lee. Lee called on Steve Ditko, who gave Peter Parker and Spider-Man a wiry, thin feeling, with many bizarre poses reminiscent of a spider. Ditko had done a great deal of work on horror comic titles, and his villains, with names like the Sandman, Doctor Octopus, the Vulture and the Green Goblin, often had a horrific tone to them.

Lee and Ditko were determined that the comic be as much about Peter Parker as it was about Spider-Man. He was just a regular guy, a "geek" that kids could identify with. Marvel called him, "the hero who could be you."

But even though life is very hard for Peter Parker and Spider-Man, he never loses his optimism. Despite his pain, he sees life with great humor and is always ready to mock those who take themselves too seriously. This above all is the message of *Spider-Man*: to face the problems of life without turning away, but face them with a smile and a sense of humor. Stan Lee said, "He was always struggling to find answers, and people can relate to that."

CREATE YOUR OWN SUPERHERO!

Superheroes are the new mythology! Armed with amazing powers, these heroes battle monsters, villains, even gods, but never fail to let their human sides peek through. Now that you've learned about the creation of Spider-Man, it's time to create your own superhero!

1. THE POWERS!

Peter Parker gains the powers of a spider: its strength, agility, its power to spin webs and climb on walls. What powers will your hero have? Will he or she have the powers of an animal or insect? Super strength? Flight? Write down five of your hero's powers:

POWER #1: _____

POWER #2: _____

POWER #3: _____

POWER #4: _____

POWER #5: _____

2. THE ORIGIN!

In superhero mythology, the "origin" is the beginning of the story: how the hero first gained his or her powers. In *Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark*, Peter acquires his powers after being bitten by a radioactive spider. The Incredible Hulk was born when Bruce Banner was trapped in a Gamma ray blast; the X-Men received their powers as mutations, through birth. In a short paragraph, describe how your hero gained his or her powers:

THE ORIGIN OF MY HERO: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. THE NAME!

Now that you know the powers and origin of your hero, what is his or her name?

My hero is called: _____

4. THE PROBLEMS!

Just as in real life, it's problems that make the lives of characters interesting to follow. Peter Parker has to deal with his sick aunt, guilt over his uncle's death, concern about his secret identity, the hatred of J. Jonah Jameson, and many other obstacles. How a hero confronts problems shows a great deal about his or her character.

Brainstorm three problems that might affect the life of your superhero

PROBLEM #1: _____

_____

PROBLEM #2: _____

_____

PROBLEM #3: _____

_____

5. THE COSTUME!

Create the costume for your superhero. How does the costume reflect the hero's name?

What colors will you use to show the hero's name, origin, powers, even his or her problems?

PLAYING WITH THE COMIC . . . ART FORM

"...comics are just words and pictures.
You can do anything with words and pictures."

— *Comics writer Warren Ellis*

1. START WITH A STORY

It all starts with a story. Before you can play with the comic art form, you're going to need a story. The comic art form, like theatre, is not just pretty pictures and exciting visuals – it is a storytelling medium that combines words and pictures. So you're going to need a story as a foundation. Any story will do. All you need is a beginning, a middle and an end.

Story suggestions:

- Create a story for the superhero you created
- Rewrite a story from mythology
- Rewrite a story from history
- Revisit a story from current events
- Recreate a story from your own life

2. FEEL THE BEATS!

Now that you've found your story, find its beats. Think of your story as a series of moments, or beats. Not all moments in a story are equal: some are very important, but others can go by quickly. Think about the moments – the beats – in your story that you want to show in your comic, that you think are most important.

3. SET UP YOUR GRID

The story beats that you have chosen will be the ones you will draw in the panels of your comic. Since panels are usually rectangular in shape, they are often set up in a grid pattern on the page. On the opposite page, find a blank grid pattern of 6 panels. You can copy this page as many times as you'd like to create your comic book, or draw your own panels and gutters to get the effects you want! As you get more comfortable in the comics art form, you may want to change the grid pattern, adding larger panels for more important beats, even changing the shape of the panels depending on the emotions of the story.

Most cartoonists use pencil and ink, but you can use any medium you wish. REMEMBER! You don't have to be a "great" artist here – the main point is to get your ideas, your passions and your emotions across to the reader. The cartoonist Rollin Kirby once said, "A good idea has carried many an indifferent drawing to glory, but never has a good drawing rescued a bad idea from oblivion."

WEBS:

- Create a comic strip or comic book with photos you take.
- Create a comic strip or comic book with cut-out photos from a magazine or newspaper
- Comic and Cartoon art is all around us. Media and advertising have appropriated the language of comic and cartoon art to make their points; artists like Keith Haring and Roy Lichtenstein have used comic and cartoon art techniques in their own work. For one week, keep a journal, recording each time you see comic and cartoon art – on the streets, in magazines, on TV. Mark down WHERE it was seen, HOW it was used, WHAT the artist was trying to get across, and, most important, how EFFECTIVE the use was, in your opinion.

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