

SUPERHERO REUNION

It's a big chill for the gang at Marvel

I went to a reunion the other day. All my old friends were there, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Ironman, Thor, the Hulk, the Avengers, The Defenders, the Fantastic Four and the Thing. It was a superheroes' reunion.

Not that I'm a superhero myself, although I have been known to bound around in tights now and again. Somehow my inability to fly, bend steel or shoot laser beams out of my naval never bothered my costumed friends while we were growing up together. Snobbery was for supervillains and seventh graders.

Besides, I got the distinct impression that they needed me as much as I needed them. After all, if a Hulk smashes in a forest does it make a noise? What adventures we had! Many were the last weekends we'd fly off to Latveria to thwart Dr. Doom's latest evil scheme. But as old friends are wont to do with the passage of the years, we eventually lost contact.

I looked up my old friends at a local comic book shop the other day, thinking I'd find them, save for the occasional wrinkle and gray hair, more or less the same as I had left them. Whoever said "you can't go home again" must have been from Gotham City.

I didn't expect miracles. I know I've aged quite a bit since Spider-Man and I last took on Dr. Octopus (and, by the way, cleaned his clock). I at least expected Reed Richards (alias "Mr. Fantastic," the leader of the Fantastic Four) to have more gray hair than just the silver-streaked temples he's sported since the early '60s. I was sure he was retired by now, too arthritic to use

his amazing stretching powers without having a primal scream.

To my surprise, however, neither Reed nor any of my other old friends had aged a day since the early '70s. But they were not the same guys I remember.

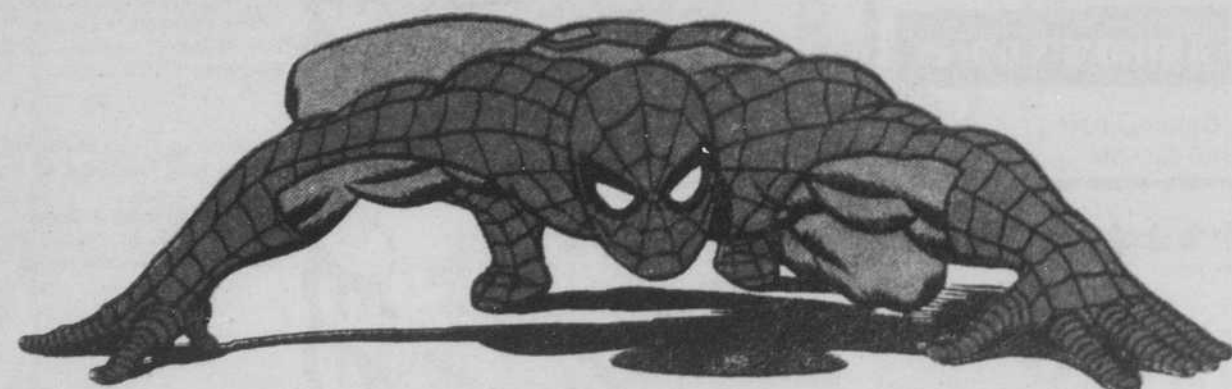
Ironman, I found out, was no longer millionaire industrialist Tony Stark, but a black test pilot named James Rhodes. It seems Tony had to give up his ironclad alter ego after he fell prey to alcoholism.

If that weren't bad enough, Yellowjacket was court-martialed and thrown out of the Avengers after suffering a nervous breakdown, and Spider-Man revealed that he was sexually molested as a child. What's next? Is the Hulk a bed-wetter? And, if he is, who will save mankind?

Speaking about the Hulk, he's not speaking. Granted, with a vocabulary that didn't extend far beyond "Hulk will smash," he never was one of the world's great conversationalists. But now he just grunts, growls and smashes. I ran into him a few months ago and he had somehow retained the brilliant mind of his alter ego, Bruce Banner. God knows how he was reduced to grunts. I guess he's been hanging around Lou Ferrigno too much.

Between Tony Stark's alcoholism, Yellowjacket's neurosis, Spidey's tortured past and the Hulk's laryngitis, superheroes' problems have gotten too complex. When I used to hang around the Avengers, the biggest crisis was Captain America's disillusionment with the government. After nine issues, he got a grip on himself and realized there was no reason to give up a swell set of tights.

Back then, no problem was so big that it couldn't be solved by beating the Mole Man to a bloody pulp. As the Falcon once put it: "Man, this is where it's at! Thumping 'n crazies is my thing!"



One of the biggest changes from the old days is that Ben Grimm, the rocky orange bruiser known to the world as the Thing, has quit the Fantastic Four and started his own comic book. How can one have the Fantastic Four without the Thing? It's like having the Old Testament without Moses.

The Thing gave us so much. His deathless battle cry, "It's clobberin' time!" became an overture to many of my childhood tantrums. Ben has been replaced in the Fantastic Four by a large green woman named She-Hulk. Unlike her male counterpart, She-Hulk is quite intelligent and doesn't grunt (at least not in Comics Code-approved stories).

Aside from suddenly recalling a traumatic childhood, Spider-Man has undergone several other changes since I last saw him. He's now wearing a different costume, discarding his classic red and blue fighting togs for a sleek new black outfit. Actually, he hasn't quite discarded the old costume. From what I could tell, he's having some problem deciding what outfit he likes better and is currently alternating between the two.

The new costume had some major problems at first. Before Spidey's ex-girlfriend, the Black Cat, made him a duplicate pair of the black undies, the original pair had somehow come to life and attacked the ol' wallcrawler. I could have told Spidey from experience that if you don't do your laundry, it takes on a life of its own.

At any rate, at least Peter Parker (Spidey's secret identity) finally got out of college. After spending some 15 years getting his bachelor's degree (which is about average for comic book heroes and University students), Peter decided he couldn't be a superhero, free-lance

photographer and graduate student all at the same time. He is now a full-time photographer for the New York Daily Bugle, earning most of his money taking pictures of himself as Spider-Man. It's a living.

The most tragic news I received was that Captain Marvel had died of cancer. It seems he was exposed to some carcinogenic nerve gas while battling a guy named Agent Nitro and, after a long illness, passed away a few years ago. I'm so ashamed. I didn't even go to the funeral. Still, it's not my fault. No one told me. I don't even hear from Daredevil at Christmas anymore.

Captain Marvel has been replaced by a new Captain Marvel, a black woman who can turn her body into light or sound waves. She's more attractive than the old Captain Marvel, I suppose, but I still mourn his passing. I remember how full of optimism he was when he was finally freed from the dread Negative Zone.

These two Captain Marvels should not be confused, however, with the Captain Marvel who flies around in red underwear yelling "Shazam?" By the early '70s, he was working over at D.C. Comics, the company that employed Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern and that crowd. I only hung around with the Marvel Comics Group as a kid. Oh, I'd run into Wonder Woman or the Flash at a party now and then, but I was a die-hard Marvel loyalist.

I must admit I had a crush on Wonder Woman at one time, but I never had the affection for her that I had for the Wasp. The Wasp was a winsome little nymph who could shrink to a height of six inches and sting the hell out of the bad guys. God, was she cute! I think I liked her so much because she reminded me of my first love, Tinkerbell. Unfortunately, she was married to Yellowjacket at the time.

I understand, however, she divorced him after his breakdown and is now looking for a new man. Perhaps I should start hanging out at the comic book store more often.

On the other hand, superheroes have changed too much since the days of my youth. In many ways, they've lost a sense of tradition and in the pursuit of sophistication, gotten too involved in soap opera plot twists. How I long to hear just one superhero say "take that, you rat!" and "oh, so you want to play, huh?"



By Thomas Henderson
Superheroes courtesy of Marvel Comics

PWIP! You're Dead!

Pow! Bam! What's comic book action without the appropriate onomatopoeia? Below are some of the more colorful terms and their definition.

Pwip: A common noise heard around the house when you're using your web-shooters.

Bwak: The sound heard when boarding-up a window.

Brr-inng: The phone, as in "Honey, the phone is 'brr-innging.'"

Swak: A hard right to the jaw.

Pwam: A hard left to the jaw.

Blangg: The sound of one of New York's finest service revolvers.

Kaspwatt: The sound you make when you beat up several bad guys at once.

Fwak: Another hard right to the jaw.

Pop, Flash, Pop: The sound of obnoxious photojournalists taking a picture of a reluctant superhero.

Knock: Someone's at the door, have to hide my costume!

Bzzt: Emergency signal! Dr. Doom has blown up the Humane Society!

Wham: Someone is pissed.

Wrok: An uppercut.

Frak: Ooo, a kick in the face!

Bkak: Hope he's got a dental plan.

Wham: An oldy, but a goody.

Kratham: The familiar sound a mutant makes when thrown against your computer console.

Krak: Don't worry, it's paid for.

Zzak: It going to be a bad day for this alien.

Zowk: There goes the Neutronium P-Q-31 Space Modulator

Zark: Back to the shop!

Choom: Oh, so that's what it sounds like when you blast a Venusian.

Smengg: That'll teach you to point.

Splengg: One more hard left to the jaw.

Splam: We used to eat that in the Army.

Scam: Right in da kisser!

Smeed: The sound resulting from getting hit on the side of the head with a kitchen table.

Tramb: It never sounds like that when I'm kicked in the face.

Ptom: Pass the Anacin, please.

Slamm: Neanderthal version of the Heimlich Maneuver.

Kong: Beetle Bailey in Southeast Asia.

Thok: The sound of a friendly giant hitting a bad guy

Tha-Kow: The Final Blow.

Ba-Da-Da-Doom!: The End.

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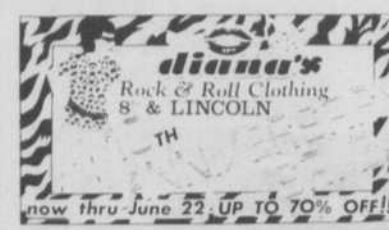
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