

STAN LEE 1922-2018

# Creator of a galaxy of Marvel superheroes, dies

By ANDREW DALTON AND DAVE ZELIO  
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In this April 16, 2002, file photo, Stan Lee, 79, creator of comic-book franchises such as "Spider-Man," "The Incredible Hulk" and "X-Men," smiles during a photo session in his office in Santa Monica, Calif. Comic book genius Lee, the architect of the contemporary comic book, has died. He was 95.

AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File

LOS ANGELES — Stan Lee, the creative dynamo who revolutionized the comic book and helped make billions for Hollywood by introducing human frailties in Marvel superheroes, such as Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four and the Incredible Hulk, died Monday. He was 95.

Lee was declared dead at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, according to Kirk Schenck, an attorney for Lee's daughter, J.C. Lee.

As the top writer at Marvel Comics and later as its publisher, Lee was widely considered the architect of the contemporary comic book. He revived the industry in the 1960s by offering the costumes and action craved by younger readers while insisting on sophisticated plots, college-level dialogue, satire, science fiction, even philosophy.

Millions responded to the unlikely mix of realistic fantasy, and many of his characters, including Spider-Man, the Hulk and X-Men, went on to become stars of blockbuster films. He won the National Medal of Arts in 2008.

Recent projects Lee helped make possible range from the films "Avengers: Infinity War," "Black Panther" and "Guardians of the Galaxy" to such TV series as "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D." and "Daredevil." Lee was recognizable to his fans, having had cameos in many Marvel films and TV projects, often delivering his trademark motto, "Excelsior!"

"Captain America" actor Chris Evans mourned the loss on Twitter: "There will

never be another Stan Lee. For decades he provided both young and old with adventure, escape, comfort, confidence, inspiration, strength, friendship and joy. He exuded love and kindness and will leave an indelible mark on so, so, so many lives. Excelsior!"

Lee hit his stride in the 1960s when he brought the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Spider-Man, Iron Man and numerous others to life. "It was like there was something in the air. I couldn't do anything wrong," he said.

His heroes, meanwhile, were a far cry from virtuous do-gooders, such as rival DC Comics' Superman.

The Fantastic Four fought with each other. Spider-Man was goaded into superhero work by his alter ego, Peter Parker, who suffered from unrequited crushes, money problems and dandruff. The Silver Surfer, an alien doomed to wander Earth's atmosphere, waxed about the woeful nature of man. The Hulk was marked by self-loathing. Daredevil was blind and Iron Man had a weak heart.

Some of Lee's creations became symbols of social change — the inner turmoil of Spider-Man represented '60s America, for example, while The Black Panther and The Savage She-

Hulk mirrored the travails of minorities and women.

"I think of them as fairy tales for grown-ups," he told The AP. "We all grew up with giants and ogres and witches. Well, you get a little bit older and you're too old to read fairy tales. But I don't think you ever outgrow your love for those kind of things, things that are bigger than life and magical and very imaginative."

Lee scripted most of Marvel's superhero comics himself during the '60s, including ones about the Avengers and the X-Men, two of the most enduring. In 1972, he became Marvel's publisher and editorial director; four

years later, 72 million copies of "Spider-Man" were sold.

CBS turned the Hulk into a successful TV series, with Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno portraying the doomed scientist from 1978-82. A Spider-Man series ran briefly in 1978. Both characters were featured in animated TV series as well.

The first big-budget movie based on Lee's characters, "X-Men," was a smash in 2000, earning more than \$130 million at North American theaters. "Spider-Man" did even better, taking in more than \$400 million in 2002. A Marvel movie empire would

emerge after that, one of the most lucrative mega-franchises in cinema history, with the recent "Avengers: Infinity War" grossing more than \$2 billion worldwide. In 10 years, the Marvel Cinematic Universe film share netted over \$17.6 billion in worldwide grosses.

Lee's direct influence faded in the 1970s as he gave up some of his editorial duties at Marvel. But with his trademark white mustache and tinted sunglasses, he was the industry's most recognizable figure. He lectured widely on popular culture.

As sales of comics declined, Marvel was forced into bankruptcy proceedings that meant it had to void a lifetime contract prohibiting Lee from working for anyone else. Lee later sued Marvel for \$10 million, saying the company cheated him out of millions in profits from movies based on his characters.

In 2000, Lee agreed to write stories for DC Comics, reinventing Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and other signature characters for Marvel's one-time rival. In the late 1990s, he looked to capitalize on the Internet craze, offering animated "webisodes" of comic-like action.

Lee's wife and partner in nearly everything, Joan Lee, died in 2017, leaving a void that made her husband, by then in mental and physical decline, vulnerable to hangers-on who began to surround him. Lawsuits, court fights and an elder abuse investigation all emerged in the fight over who spoke for the elderly Lee.

Lee is survived by his daughter, Joanie, and a younger brother who also worked in comics, Larry Lieber.

"I think of them as fairy tales for grown-ups"

— Stan Lee, creator of comic book franchises

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