

# The Drink Tank



SamFelix

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## Alissa, Chris, Chuck

This is late, no?

Well, actually not. We live on a "When it's done, it's done" schedule!

This is out in October, largely because, well, life happens, things come up and things rearrange around them. The next issue, all about the X-Men, has an October 25 deadline. I'm excited.

Spider-Man has been a character for 60 years, and as you can see from the variety of articles here, it's been a crazy wide-and-varied 60 years. I had planned on writing about all the Spider-Man action figures, and I looked on eBay.

There are, at my last count, 39 different Spider-Man figures, the first released in 1971. That, coupled with the fact that I've been writing the *SF Book of Lists 2: Two Lists Enter, One List Leaves* and you can see why I didn't manage it.



# ***Spider-Man (1967)***

## **by Juan Sanmiguel**



I first saw Spider-Man on *The Electric Company*, when he read to us silently and captured villains at the end of each short segment with his webs, interacting with others only through word balloons. It was fun, but we did not know much about the character.

Then there was the year that CBS showed a live-action series starring Nicholas Hammond. It was fun, though they did not have the budget to realize Spider-Man's rogues gallery. Spidey faced a bunch of regular criminals who sometimes employed science-fiction gimmicks, like mind-control gas.

A short while later, the animated series from 1967 started to be shown in my area. Now this adaptation was closer to the comic book than anything so far. It was still a very odd adaptation. These were half-hour shows with limited animation (they could only afford to animate Spider-Man if he only had his mask, gloves, and boots webbed).

The show has two distinct styles, the first of which is more traditional. Spider-Man fought many of usual the villains and regularly interacted with J. Jonah Jameson and Betty Brant at the *Daily Bugle*. The backgrounds looked sharper.

Most of the episodes consist of two stories. A Mysterio and a Rhino story were each covered in the first full episode I watched. Except for Mysterio, we rarely see the villains out of costume. They were even incarcerated in costume. In this show, the Green Goblin is obsessed with mystic forces rather than being a tech-based criminal. I looked forward to these episodes. I thought these were the last episodes of the show since they looked better than what came later. Some of the standout episodes are:

- “Menace of Mysterio”: Mysterio frames Spider-Man for a robbery. He then offers to destroy Spider-Man for a fee paid by J. Jonah Jameson. Can Spider-Man prove his innocence? There were some nice action bits, and we see a little of Mysterio’s real identity as a stuntman.
- “Horn of the Rhino”: The Rhino tries to take a secret military weapon and Spider-Man stops him even while sick. The animation for the Rhino was pretty good. He was a deadly threat.
- “The Spider and the Fly”: Spider-Man takes on the Human Fly who has similar powers. It becomes a bigger challenge when he discovers there are two Human Flies. The costume design for the Human Fly looks like Venom without the spider on their chest and his teeth and tongue. It was cool to see Spider-Man fighting someone with similar powers.

The original animation company went bankrupt and animator Ralph Bakshi, who would later gain fame through the animated feature *Fritz the Cat*, took over the second and third seasons. In these seasons, the world of Spider-Man was usually overcast. There were rarely any regular villains from the comics. Spider-Man fought aliens, monsters, mad scientists, and human villains with green skin. *The Daily Bugle* did not feature as much in these stories. There was also a re-use of animation. Many episodes killed time with scenes of Spider-Man swinging through Manhattan, or in the alien landscapes he found himself in. Some of the latter episodes blatantly reused footage from older episodes.

Below are some of the highlights of the show:

- "The Origin of Spider-Man": This was the first time I got to see how Peter Parker became Spider-Man. The live-action show ignored the death of Peter's Uncle Ben. The episode was based on the version of Spider-Man's origin shown in the *Spectacular Spider-Man* magazine, which was published a few months before the broadcast.
- "Menace from the Bottom of the World": Here, Spider-Man fights the Molemen, who have been lowering whole bank buildings to their underworld. This sets a pattern for many episodes in which Spider-Man would go to an alien world, and fight monsters in that world on his way to the lair of the villain he must stop. This was seen in "Spider-Man Battles the Molemen," "Phantom from the Depths of Time," "Vine," "Neptune's Nose Cone," and "Rollarama."
- "Revolt in the Fifth Dimension": Spider-Man must prevent Infinata from getting the library of the planet Goth. The library was condensed into a small sphere and given to Spider-Man by a dying alien. Infinata is a powerful dictator from the Fifth Dimension, and he unleashes all of his power to get the library from Spider-Man. This was a bizarre episode. Most of the footage was from a show called *Rocket Robin Hood*. The images are very dark and psychedelic. ABC refused to show this, and it was not seen until syndication.
- "To Cage a Spider", "The Big Brainwasher" and "The Madness of Mysterio": These were adaptations from the comic. They took liberties, like not having Mysterio in his costume, and condensing the story in the case of "The Big Brainwasher."





Infinata (Right)

The show's theme song became iconic and has been used many times in the Spider-Man films. The opening crescendo just before the lyrics start is a great ramp-up for action. It is used when Peter goes out to confront his uncle's killer in "The Origin of Spider-Man".

The incidental music was usually jazzy. Some of it was stock music, which showed up in places like "The War Machines" (*Doctor Who*) or on the TV soap, *Dallas*. The music was a great complement to the action on-screen. Someone placed all the tracks on YouTube and can be found if you search for "Spider-Man 1967 music".

After I saw the show, I read Spider-Man comics in the library or checked them out quickly at newsstands and comic stores. The next version of Spider-Man in the media would be *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* (broadcasting in the same year). Both shows would be closer to the comics and showed the greater Marvel Universe.

The influence of the show is still felt. The Spider-Man from the show appears in the Spider-Verse films. Sound effects and the animation style were seen in an animated DC short film on *The Blue Beetle* (which can be found on Max). The Blue

Beetle that appeared in that short film was the Ted Kord version created by Spider-Man co-creator Steve Ditko.

At the time of writing, *Spider-Man* is not streaming. Several years ago, a DVD of the series was released. If you can find it, please check it out. It will certainly be a trip.



# Spider-Man: The Combination Super-Hero

by Julian West



There were two periods of outstanding creativity in the superhero genre. The first was in the late 1930s, just before the Second World War. In only two or three years, many of the characters who remain central to this day were created – Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman for DC/National; the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner, and Captain America for Timely; and Captain Marvel for Fawcett, among many others. Captain Marvel was perhaps initially the most popular.

Why did this surge of creativity happen at precisely this time? Well, the creativity didn't. Siegel and Schuster had conceived the idea of Superman some years before, but since there was no concept of such a thing as a superhero, they couldn't get him published. When the character eventually became a huge hit, there was a market for superheroes, and they came thick and fast – created by the same people who'd been writing other comics previously.



Superman was one template for a superhero. He had astonishing powers, and he had a strange alien origin while hiding his real self under a false identity. Many writers took this template and changed certain things. Wonder Woman was Superman, but a woman. Captain Marvel was Superman, but actually a twelve-year-old boy. Captain Marvel was eventually deemed to be such an obvious copy of Superman that DC was eventually able to sue to prevent the character from being published.

But the alternative template was the Batman. Here was a superhero who wasn't super. He had the trappings of both superpowers and the occult, but in fact, was just a guy dressed up. He did astonishing things, but they were all the more astonishing because he wasn't in himself anything special. He had gadgets, but they weren't things that weren't available to everyone else. He didn't even have the boost of a special formula to make him exceptional, like Captain America. He just worked hard.

Bruce Wayne was a grown man, unlike Billy Batson, Captain Marvel's alter ego. In order to allow identification on behalf of the predominantly juvenile readership, Robin was introduced. Robin was only eight years old when introduced. Having him help Batman fight armed adult criminals seemed quite normal at the time.

Both Batman and Robin had a traumatic origin story. Bruce Wayne saw both his parents murdered in front of him, which inspired his odd behavior. Superman was also orphaned, but it was when he was a baby, and he had an idyllic childhood with loving adoptive parents. The darkness of Batman is built-in, something that has grown through the years but has always been part of the character's gothic DNA.

Through the 1940s, comics were big business, but gradually there was a decline in popularity in the 1950s. There were few new characters created, and only Superman flourished, with Batman and Wonder Woman being the only other titles still in print. Then came the Silver Age rebirth, beginning when DC decided to reinvent many of their properties from the 1940s, starting with the Flash, and to create entirely new characters. They tended to use the two templates established previously. The Martian Manhunter was Superman, but Martian. Green Arrow was Batman, using a bow and arrows. This led to a certain blandness in the new characters. However, they proved extremely popular.

Stan Lee at Marvel, the successor to Timely, saw an opportunity. Blessed with two outstanding talents in the form of Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby, he started to cash in on the new wave of superhero popularity. (I won't deal with the details of individual contribution here – that has been extensively covered elsewhere. Suffice to say that Lee's claims of primacy should not be taken as entirely reliable).

The first superhero comic from Marvel was *Fantastic Four* #1. It seemed as if the rulebook had been torn up. This was a team of superheroes, but none of them had been seen before. There was a Human Torch, using a previous character as the basis for the powers, but he was an entirely new person. They were a family rather than a team. There were no costumes and no secret identities. The action happened in New York, not some made-up city. And they were deeply flawed people. Each was defined not by their powers, but by their personal limitations. Reed was arrogant and emotionless. Sue was flighty and silly. Johnny was hot-headed and reckless. Ben was surly and violent. The stories didn't revolve exclusively around them fighting villains. It was in the interactions between the team members.

Of course, it was an illusion of originality rather than something entirely new. The template for the FF didn't come from superhero comics, but from many other groups of four, starting with Dumas and including Challengers of the Unknown. Having conflicts within a small group of characters was a staple of fiction for centuries, and it was an anomaly that superhero comics had previously avoided.



The Marvel formula proved successful. Each new character was given a carefully selected flaw. Often it was a physical limitation – Daredevil was blind, Professor X was in a wheelchair, Don Blake had a limp, and Iron Man had a heart condition. Sometimes it was something different. The X-Men meant well but were persecuted and mistrusted. Becoming the Hulk meant Bruce Banner's enormous intellect was replaced with unreasoning rage.

The powers of the characters tended to be unexceptional. Most of them were just strong, some were strong and agile. Ant-Man could shrink, like DC's the Atom. Quicksilver was fast, like the Flash. The added value came from other things.

And of all the new characters, none was as popular as Spider-Man. He seemed something genuinely new and fresh. He didn't seem like a superhero character whom anyone had seen before. And yet Spider-Man was, wittingly or not, an assemblage of what had come before.

The Superman/Batman dichotomy was as established in Marvel as in the old DC characters. There were characters with unusual powers. They tended to be less powerful than the corresponding DC characters. Superman could move planets with ease, while The Hulk could destroy buildings. Nevertheless, they were certainly more powerful than ordinary people.

There were also Batman-like ordinary humans. Daredevil and Captain America were slightly enhanced, but their basic abilities were not that beyond any other normal person. Hawkeye was just a talented archer. These characters intermingled with the others, but the power differentials were not so high as to make the interactions seem absurd.

Spider-Man was definitely in the powered camp. His strength was somewhat short of the powerhouses – Thor, Iron Man, and the Hulk – but it was far beyond an ordinary human. He could climb walls. He could sense danger instantly. In addition to these inherent abilities, he devised a form of dissolving glue that he could spray like a web.

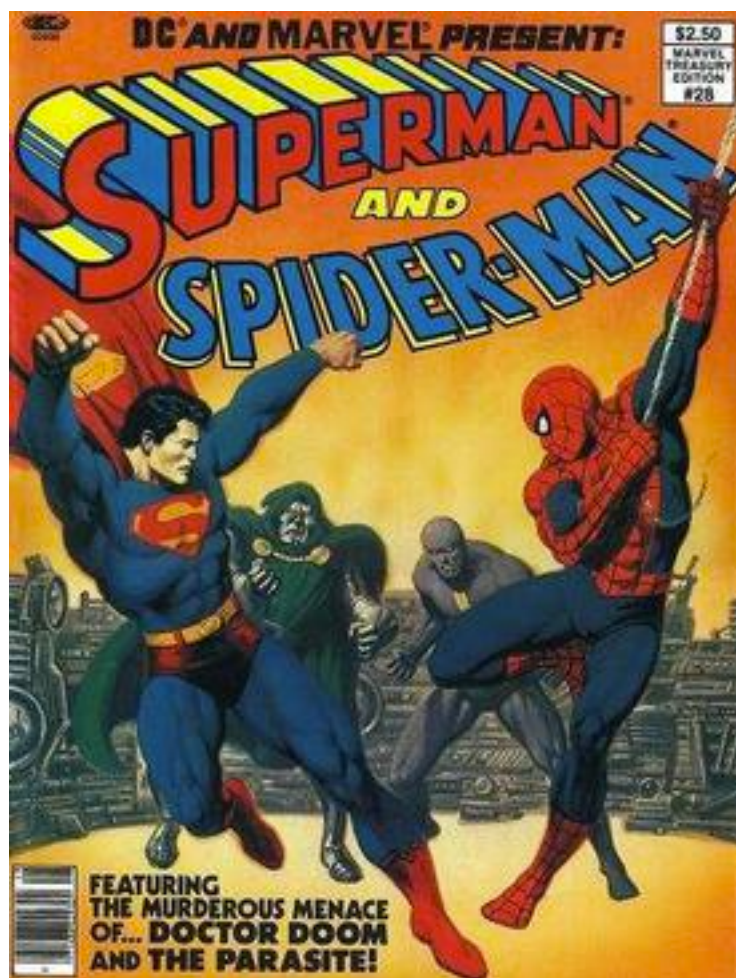
So far, the Superman template. But then we see the comics, and Spider-Man operates in a different area. He is an inner-city crime fighter. The typical Spider-Man fight is him swooping down on a gang of ordinary thugs and beating them up while he dodges bullets. This is Batman territory. What does Spider-Man do with his incredible web sprayers? He uses them to restrain villains, to hold on to his camera, but mostly it's to swing from building to building – *exactly like Batman*.

Like Batman, Spider-Man has a selection of colorful villains. They tend to be slightly more powerful than the typical Batman villain – but this just gives Spider-Man the chance to dodge around and evade them. A Superman fight involves an exchange of blows. The same with the Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, and the Thing . . . any of the powered heroes will dive in and take their shots. It's accepted that

Daredevil will spend his time diving out of the way. And that's what Spider-Man does – Batman-style.

Fair enough when he's fighting the Lizard, say, or Electro. But he does the same thing when fighting the Kingpin, who has no powers at all, or Hammerhead, whose superpower is that he has a steel plate in his skull. (Warning: if you have suffered brain trauma and have had to have part of your cranium surgically replaced, don't run headfirst into walls.) Sometimes this is ironically commented on – he's spending so much time fighting ordinary criminals that he just holds back his full strength. That he is super-strong is made clear in the iconic storyline where he has to lift an entire building off himself just to rescue Aunt May.

Holding back is an after-the-fact justification in-story, but the real explanation is simply that Spider-Man is Superman, but with the Batman template applied. He has the superpowers but tends to behave as if he didn't, because that's the kind of character he is. Even more than Batman, the typical Spider-Man story involves battling against impossible odds but struggling through because of sheer will. In order to get away with this, we have to forget sometimes that Spider-Man is actually far stronger than most of his foes.



This dichotomy in the character is something we have to overlook, in order to make the story work. There's a Mitchell and Webb sketch about a superhero team called Angel Summoner and BMX Bandit. The ridiculous disparity in abilities means that BMX bandit has essentially nothing to do while Angel Summoner can call on a host of angels to defeat their enemies. It's a comment on every issue of



Justice League or World's Finest – but also on Spider-Man struggling to defeat Fancy Dan and the Ox.

Once we see that Spider-Man is a combination of Batman and Superman, we can look for other similarities. The colours of his costume are like a blend of the two DC heroes. The grey and black of Batman mixes with the blue of Superman, to give a dark shade of blue, with a splash of Superman's cape on top. Throw in a nod to the alliterative Billy Batson by having Peter Parker being a teenager – who nevertheless calls himself *Spider-Man*, when his predecessors would be Spider-Kid or Young Spider.

Spider-Man beats the two DC heroes by being orphaned before he even appears. We don't know if it's traumatic or not, as his parents aren't of any importance for most of his history. Peter Parker loses his father-figure, Uncle Ben, in an incident even worse than Bruce Wayne's, in that it's actually his fault. It's a defining part of his character, where he switches from being selfish to altruistic. An important twist, which brings him into the flawed Marvel world. DC characters were always guilt-free.

So, in a sense, Spider-Man was one of the least original characters of the original Marvel line. Why then the immense appeal? Why is he the Marvel superhero known to most people, the most iconic, the most identified with?

It goes back to the Marvel idea of the flaw that each Marvel hero has. The only one who seems to have escaped this is Spider-Man. He's smart, good-looking, has a likeable personality, a loving family structure. His future would have been bright even without gaining his powers. But his fatal flaw is that he was subject to the same reality as a normal human being.

Sometimes this is characterized as being more realistic. It should be said that Spider-Man is not a realistic character, in any sense. His problems are not those of real people. They are, however, the kind of problems that correspond to the problems real people have. They are vague, they come from all sides, sometimes resolved, sometimes not. It's a contrast to, say, Daredevil. Matt Murdock has a good life, aside from his disability. Putting that on one side, and there's not much going wrong. He has a string of attractive girlfriends and a brilliant career. It's telling that Daredevil became at its most successful when a succession of writers starting with Miller set out to ruin Matt Murdock's life – something that became the USP of the comic. Indeed, post-Spider-Man, almost

every character in comics has had their lives spoiled to make the story more interesting.

Spider-Man is unpopular at school, finds it difficult to find a girlfriend, and has to constantly worry about his aunt and her frail health. He has to find a job, so becomes a photojournalist – a nod to Clark Kent, whose meek manner and glasses were already a model for the young Peter Parker. But unlike the avuncular Perry White, Peter is working for the deranged J. Jonah Jameson, who hates Spider-Man. Other superheroes are popular – but Spider-Man is disliked.

This is where Spider-Man, in spite of his creative origins, can be considered an original creation. He has a difficult life because we all have difficult lives. We can identify with him because he's like us. The character suffers from the biggest flaw of all – being human. It's never a parade of misery because his life has ups as well as downs, and we appreciate Peter's ups all the more because of the downs.

And finally, the message of Spider-Man is a healthy corrective to the superhero power fantasy. It's all too easy to imagine being Superman and having the power to solve all one's problems. Spider-Man reminds us that problems are not something to be solved by one simple solution. He's a fantasy creation with his feet firmly on the ground.



# Damn Bodavians . . .

## James Bacon Consults Rob Hansen



James Bacon was speaking with Rob Hansen, who was supporting him with his Spider-Man article. James knew of Alan Cavanaugh who appeared in the US comic *Iron Fist*, and the question of how comics are dealt with as they are reprinted came up as *Iron Fist* was reprinted in the UK in 1981.

Rob noted: "Not having seen them, it would be interesting to know if Marvel UK edited Alan Cavanaugh's appearances when they reprinted them over here."

What made me think they might have is remembering how Marvel stories have always been edited in the UK for political content. Back in the 1960s, in the days of Wham! Smash! Pow!, Terrific, and Fantastic, publisher IPC amended the stories so that the Communists in them became the Bodavians and every Commie villain - be they Russian, Chinese, or whatever - was from Bodavia. I distinctly

remember the opening page of the Thor tale "Prisoner of the Reds" from *Journey into Mystery* #87 (December 1962) becoming "Prisoner in Chains" when reprinted in *Fantastic* #6 (25 March 1967), while in the Marvel UK days, it became "A God in Chains" in *Spider-Man Comics Weekly* #5 (17 March 1973). Presenting all three splash pages side by side would make for an interesting triptych.

I did wonder if this might be some hangover from the British crusade against US comics that happened more-or-less contemporaneously with Wertham's assault but was secretly backed by the Communist Party of Great Britain (seriously!). However, when I checked Martin Barker's *A Haunt of Fears* (Pluto Press, 1984), where I first encountered this revelation back in the day, it seemed that this was not the case. The CPGB was attacking the same EC comics and for the same ostensible reason – because of their alleged but never proven corrupting effect on children. They had it in for them because of what they regarded as creeping Americanism and the cultural pollution they saw in them. Captain America the Commie Smasher didn't even rate a mention.

It's possible the Marvel UK ones were made to forestall complaints from the CPGB, but I suspect that for both IPC and Marvel UK it came down more to not wanting to subject British children to such crude propaganda.

It turns out Rob misremembered some details and Stuart Vandal added to the conversation:

Another example is *Tales to Astonish* #65-67 we see Bruce Banner kidnapped by Russians, with hammer and sickle emblems all over the place. Reprinted in *Smash!* #54-56, no text is altered to mention Bodavians, but the hammer and sickles are whited out. It's when they are again reprinted in *Mighty World of Marvel* #17-19 that we've suddenly got Bodavians and their lightning emblem.

They didn't start changing the Russians and Chinese to Bodavians until Marvel UK came in. Yes, *Fantastic* #6 did amend the title of the Thor tale, but there's no mention of Bodavia.

You can see a panel comparison of the Marvel US and Marvel UK versions (I didn't think to include the IPC versions) in my article on Marvel stories produced in the UK, a little way down the page: <http://www.marvunapp.com/ohotmu/appendixes/marveloverseasuk.html>

The discussion continues.



# The Shocktacular Spider-Man: Landmark Stories from the 1980 by Helena Nash



As Marvel's most popular character during the mid-1980s with three ongoing monthly titles (four if you count *Marvel Team-Up*), your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man had a lot going on. So, it was perhaps inevitable that some of his adventures veered into the offbeat, groundbreaking, or downright disturbing. Here are a few Spidey stories from that period that have, much like Peter's inability to stop a certain thief, haunted me ever since.

## The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man

In the landmark standalone story "The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man" (*Amazing Spider-Man* #248, written by Roger Stern, Jan 1984), the wallcrawler visits his biggest fan, nine-year-old Timothy Harrison, first blowing the kid's mind and then sitting down on Tim's bed to go through his treasured Spider-Man memorabilia. After reminiscing for a while, Spidey is about to leave when Tim earnestly asks him to tell him who he really is.

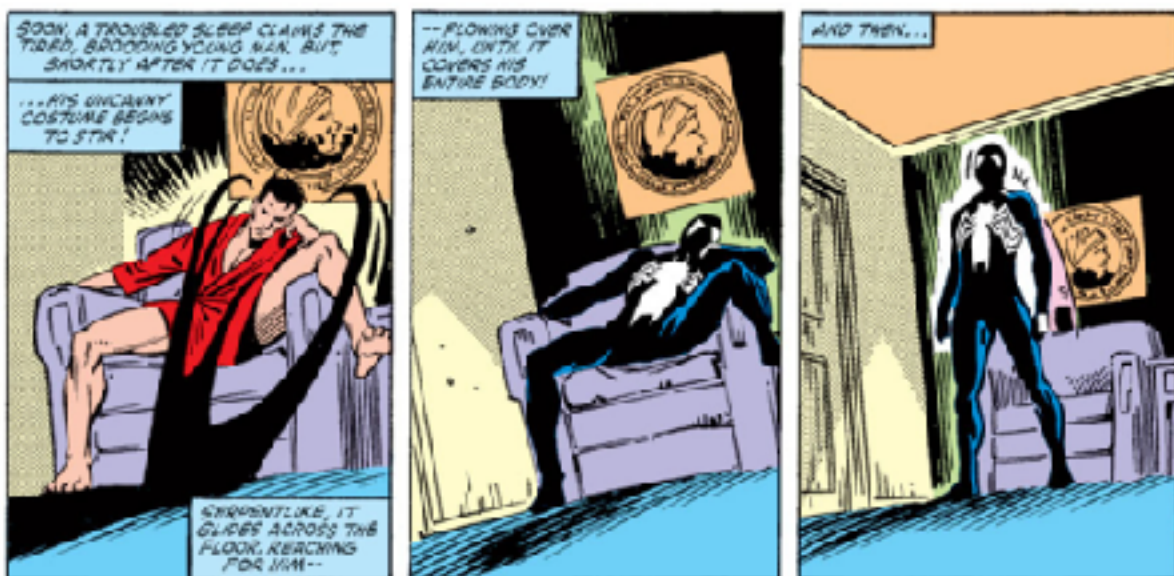
Spidey hesitates and turns wordlessly to the window as if to leave. Then he comes to a decision and pulls off his mask, revealing his true identity, Peter Parker. Tim swears again to keep Pete's secret "forever and ever." Finally, it's time for Spidey to go. Pulling on his mask once more he leaps out of Tim's window and swings away into the night, only to rest on the wall of the cancer clinic where Tim is a patient. The *Daily Bugle* narration tells the reader that Tim has leukemia and won't live much longer. A sensitive, powerful story that was voted among the "Top 10 Spider-Man Stories of All Time" by *Wizard* magazine.



## The Alien Costume Saga

Shortly after that, Spidey returns from the original *Secret Wars* with a swanky new black and white costume (*Amazing Spider-Man* #252, May 1984), which can do all sorts of cool things like generate its own web fluid and morph into regular street clothes. Only it turns out that the costume is actually alive, has been taking Peter over while he sleeps (*Amazing Spider-Man* #258, Nov 1984), and is getting to the point where it's going to physically and mentally bond with him forever.

Despite peeling it off his body with help from the Fantastic Four, the freaky black suit escapes confinement and slithers back to Peter's apartment to renew their creepy "relationship." Fortunately, Spidey just about manages to rid himself of the greedy symbiote thanks to some very loud church bells, though the costume returns with a new meat host (*Amazing Spider-Man* #300, Jan 1988) in the form of spider-nemesis Venom, getting a head start on the 1990s comics era by a couple of years.



## The Death of Jean DeWolff

Long-time Spidey ally Captain Jean DeWolff of the NYPD came to an ignoble end not at the hands of a super-powered villain, nor by making a heroic sacrifice to save the day, nor falling to unbeatable odds in a Bolivian Army ending à la *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (or the last episode of *Angel*, if you prefer). No, she was unceremoniously murdered in her sleep by a psychopath in a ski mask armed with a shotgun (written by Peter David, *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man* #107, Oct 1985). And not even at the climax of the storyline, but in the first episode, in an example of fridging a female character to motivate the male star that precedes the infamous episode in *Green Lantern* (volume 3 #54, 1997) by some seven years.

Never mind that she was a tough, independent broad with a unique sartorial style (I never was quite sure why she dressed like Bonnie Parker and drove a 1930s roadster), Jean DeWolff had to die to give Spider-Man a reason to go after the serial killing Sin-Eater in a four-issue arc that saw several other people brutally shotgunned to death along the way. And just to undercut DeWolff's character a little more, our hero goes through her drawers post-funeral and discovers a stash of Spidey-related news articles which leads him to the inescapable conclusion that the no-nonsense police captain secretly had romantic feeling for him. Way to retcon her into another dead girlfriend, folks.

But hey, in the fourth and final episode (*The Spectacular Spider-Man* #110, Jan 1986), at least Daredevil and Spider-Man reveal their true identities to each other, so that's something, right? A downbeat, decidedly non-super storyline that better fits *The Punisher* (or Daredevil's own title) than ol' Webhead's, perhaps.





## Kraven's Last Hunt

Marvel wasn't shy about spreading storylines across all three 1980s spider titles (*Amazing*, *Peter Parker*, and *Web*) in a blatant ploy to increase sales. Case in point, the memorable "Kraven's Last Hunt," in which ageing, semi-naked (and sometimes completely butt-naked), Russian big-game hunter Sergei Kravinoff deals with the mother of all male menopauses by stripping naked, eating his way out of a room full of spiders, shooting Spider-Man point blank, and then burying him (*Web of Spider-Man* #31, Oct 1987) before dressing up in Spidey's outfit and going all Rorschach on New York's criminals, including the cannibalistic, cop-licking rat-man Vermin (*Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man* #131, Oct 1987).

A moody, hallucinatory journey into darkness from writer J M DeMatteis and the art team of Mike Zeck and Bob

McLeod. The cover of Spidey crawling from the grave is awesome.



## Suggested Reading

- *Amazing Spider-Man* #248 or the trade paperback *The Very Best of Spider-Man* for "The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man."
- *Amazing Spider-Man* #252-258, *Peter Parker the Spectacular Spider-Man* #95, #98 to #100, and *Web of Spider-Man* #1, or the trade paperbacks *Spider-Man: The Complete Alien Costume Saga Books 1-2* for "The Alien Costume Saga."
- *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man* #107-110 or the trade paperback *Marvel Premiere Classic: The Death of Jean DeWolff* for "The Death of Jean DeWolff."

- *Web of Spider-Man #31, Amazing Spider-Man #293, Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man #131, Web of Spider-Man #32, Amazing Spider-Man #294, and Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man #132, or the trade paperback Spider-Man: Kraven's Last Hunt (among others) for "Kraven's Last Hunt."*





# Spidey in the Troubles

by James Bacon



Spider-Man went to Belfast in 1986 in a rather unexpected story that involves the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and terrorist violence, and it was potentially as complex as the actual history of the Troubles.

There is much to consider in this story, visually a portrayal of the Troubles and Belfast, its weapons and combatants, London itself, and the Metropolitan Police. The understanding of the situation in Northern Ireland as portrayed through the story's dialogue and narrative is challenging, and it is important now that we reflect and work to have a sharp understanding of what was historically correct and what was inaccurate.

Comics are just light entertainment, which we enjoy, so the comfort of time – nearly 40 years later and 25 years after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement –

affords us space to reflect. The story was written initially by a personal favorite, David Michelinie, who co-created Venom, Carnage, Scott Lang as Antman, and War Machine. His work was also in over 90 issues of *Return of the Jedi Weekly*, and he has written hundreds of comics otherwise.

The story took a sharp sideways turn, there was a filler issue, and how Marvel deployed their creative team is important here. Stand-alone filler issues were not uncommon back in the 1980s, when Marvel and other companies routinely kept inventory stories ready to be used when scheduled tales were running late, but that wasn't the case here. So why was there a creator change and a filler issue?

It was a unique situation, a scenario with these comics where history, politics, comic fiction, and current affairs all come together in a much harder realization than readers may expect.

It is 1986. Marc Silvestri is on art duties, Spider-Man is wearing the black costume, and the Troubles continue in Northern Ireland. 61 people were killed that year, more than one a week, including 27 civilians. Frequent shootings and mortar attacks were occurring consistently – the situation was complex.

Here are four deaths, including members from the eldest and youngest of humanity. Real people, with real families, people whose lives were brutally ended in 1986. This is incredibly sad and indicative of how complex the real-life situation was during this year:

- Keith White, 20, a Protestant civilian, died after being shot with a plastic bullet by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) during street disturbances.
- Mark Fizzell, 17, a Protestant and a civilian, died following a beating by republicans.
- Francis Hegarty, 45, a Catholic and a member of the IRA was killed by the IRA.
- Kathleen Mullan, 79, a Catholic civilian, was killed in her home by the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). Details from CAIN



It was never as simple as Catholic against Protestant or British Forces against the IRA. I hope these regrettable deaths go some way to helping us appreciate just how grey everything was.

Marvel Comics had traveled to Ireland many times before. There are a number of examples, going back as far as 1943. The IRA featured in a Golden Age World War II story in *Sub-Mariner* #9. In the story, "The Green Island Menace," a German agent aptly named Von Klutz sets bombs to frame the IRA, leading to their arrests. The Germans are also seeking to upset US-Irish relations by targeting a convoy, and so the Sub-Mariner fights with the IRA against the Nazis. This would be an unexpected team-up given that "Nazis saw the IRA as useful allies should the Wehrmacht invade Britain in 1940, the IRA saw Germany as a stepping stone to a United Ireland," according to QUB's David O'Donoghue.

Irish matters were subsequently infrequent but gave a narrative angle to Marvel writers at varying times. The opening narration of *Marvel Chillers featuring Modred the Mystic* #2 (1975), written by Bill Mantlo and with pencils by Sonny Trinidad, states, "The London Police force has been having a hard time of it lately . . . on an around-the-clock all-points alert because of increased bombing by IRA sympathizers in the business districts . . ." the briefest of mentions, not even required to propel the story forward, but a mention.

Alan Cavanaugh turns up in *Iron Fist* #5 in March 1976, an ex-IRA man who had served his sentence and was a target of the IRA. His story was by Chris Claremont and John Byrne and Alan would appear in #6, #9, #11, and #13 in 1977, then also issues #59 and #60 of *Power Man and Iron Fist* in 1979, giving him more than a passing role, and one that is worthy of its own article.

In *Marvel Two-In-One* Vol 1 #30 from May 1977, written by Marv Wolfman with pencils by John Buscema, Ben Grimm (the Thing) is with Alicia Masters in London. When there is a bombing in London, initially the IRA is suspected, but it is actually everyday crooks. Matters get convoluted as Spider-Woman kidnaps Alicia.

In *Marvel Super Heroes: Contest of Champions* in June 1982 we meet Shamrock, who in her first panel is described thusly: "In Northern Ireland a group of school children stare as their lives are saved from a Terrorist Bomb . . . an instant before their rescuer Shamrock disappears," and later in the same issue, Shamrock says to Captain Britain (Brian Braddock), "You wear the emblem of Great Britain," and he replies "And you the green of Ireland." The narration box

states, "Shamrock and Captain Britain, divided by their countries' enmity, eye each other suspiciously." Later, in issue #3, we have a "Begorraah! Tisn't Ireland we have been sent to, teammates" from Shamrock. The overall story was by Steven Grant, Mark Gruenwald, and Bill Mantlo with script by Bill Mantlo and art by John Romita Jr.

In Dennis O'Neil and Luke McDonnell's *Iron Man* #164 dated November 1982, Iron Man tracks some explosives used in a recent sabotage to an Aloysious Timothy Lafferty, who retorts as Iron Man smashes in the door of his "Bad Lands" compound "Faith and BEEEE . . . gorrah." As ever, accents are hard in comics, but tropes are easy, and we learn, "Thirty years I been a terrorist, arsonist and bomber" before Lafferty escapes, as Iron Man takes on a Knight.



Glorianna O'Brien was introduced in *Daredevil* #204 in April 1984. Her father, an unnamed IRA man, had been suspected by the IRA of being a traitor, then murdered by the real traitor Paddy O'Hanlan, a.k.a. the assassin Gael. Intending to slay her too, Paddy followed Glorianna to New York City, coming into conflict with Daredevil across the next three issues. Glorianna was a photographer with the Daily Bugle as well as a romantic interest to both Matt Murdock - Daredevil - and his pal, Foggy Nelson. Glorianna would appear in 23 issues subsequently, up to #256 in 1988, and then two further issues, #340 and #342, in 1995. This sequence is worthy of consideration. The initial story is by Denny O'Neil, with artwork by William Johnson and inks by Danny Bulanadi.

The duality of comic publication and character history creates interesting timelines for characters. Even though Banshee first appeared in 1966, we don't learn that he lost Maeve Rourke, his wife, to an IRA bomb until *X-Force* #31 in 1994, even though Maeve debuted in *Classic X-Men* #16 in 1987. History is tricky in Marvel.

Suffice it to say that the IRA and the Troubles did indeed get mentioned previously in Marvel. Marvel UK reprinted some of these but also created their own content, and again this is deserving of its own piece. I welcome hearing about any other instances involving Irish conflict or combatants that I have missed: [journeyplanet@gmail.com](mailto:journeyplanet@gmail.com)

To the comic then.

Marvel had three Spider-Man titles at the time, *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man*, and *Marvel Team-Up*. *Web of Spider-Man* was launched in 1985, replacing *Marvel Team-Up*, which had run for 150 issues since 1972. *Marvel Team-Up* mostly featured Spider-Man with another Marvel character as a guest, but sales were not as strong as desired. *Web of Spider-Man* was a chance to refresh and would run until 1995 and have 129 issues and 10 annuals.

Issue #1 of *Web of Spider-Man* had a stunning Charles Vess cover, with Spider-Man wearing the black alien costume. The alien costume debuted in *Amazing Spider-Man* #252 in May 1984, after Spider-Man found it on Battle World during the Secret Wars and subsequently brought it back with him to Earth. When he realized the costume was alive and feeding off him, Spider-Man got rid of it, but, thanks to Black Cat, he ended up with an identical-looking black cloth costume. The alien costume would go on to become Venom when it merged with Eddie Brock, who made a cameo in *Web of Spider-Man* #18 in September 1986. He really came to prominence in *Amazing Spider-Man* #300 in



May 1988 with the debut of the Venom symbiote. Suffice it to say that during the sequence we are considering Spider-Man wearing a black costume presents a more sinister and stronger look.

There were a series of creatives involved with the comic, but issue #16 announced, "Don't miss the 1st issue in Web's daring new adventures into mystery and suspense" on the cover as Marc Silvestri and David Michelinie seemed to bed down as the new team.

Fans appreciated the move. A review of #20 by Kerry Wilkinson on Spiderfan.org in 2004 noted "The biggest achievement here is using a fictional, comic-book character in a real-life situation and actually making a difference. Whereas *Amazing* is concerned with the Hobgoblin's ID and Flash at the moment and *Spectacular* is concentrating on Mary Jane and the Black Cat, *Web* has gone the other way and moved towards more realism." Kerry continues with some fan insight noting, "It has become an alternative, as opposed to a mimic . . . the villains in this story aren't just wild-eyed madmen who are after Spider-Man. These are real people in a realistic (albeit fictionalized) situation. In 1985, the IRA were as much a part of British society as al-Qaeda are a part of the Western world today."

Kerry continued: "Putting Spidey into its context, without coming down heavily on either side and explaining the basics of why one man's freedom fighter is another's terrorist, is a master-stroke."

The issues of *Web of Spider-Man* of interest to us, featuring a storyline about the Troubles, are #19 as an intro, # 20, # 21 briefly - two pages with a fill-in flashback story, #22, and an outro in issue #23.

In the following synopsis, I refer to Spidey or Spider-Man to indicate his costumed superhero identity, whereas mentions of Peter Parker or Peter reference the character in his normal clothes.

Issue #19 saw a sidebar interlude story featuring a terrorist attack in West Berlin. Peter Parker and ace reporter Joy Mercado meet with J. Jonah Jameson in his capacity as publisher of *Now Magazine*. Jameson wants to send them to Europe to report on Prime Minister "Maggie Thatcher" giving a speech to Parliament about terrorism in Northern Ireland. Peter is unsure, Joy is ready, and Jameson starts writing out cash vouchers for new clothes, first-class flights, etc. The style in the office is absolutely mid-1980s, and Peter considers that a holiday could be just what is needed.

First appearing in Doug Moench and Kevin Nowlan's *Moon Knight* #33 in 1983, Joy Mercado is presented as a crack journalist, described as having achieved "daring accomplishments" including having reported in 1967 on "The War in Indochina" and writing an article on Daredevil. We meet a determined journalist trying to write a story on modern myths, specifically the Druid and Moon Knight, and in doing so she upsets the Druid which pits Moon Knight and the Druid against one another. It is an interesting story, the journalist being incisive, the villain petulant but human, and the comic has Joy on the cover, with a typewriter.

Joy subsequently appears in *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man Annual #5* in 1985, by Peter David and Mark Beachum, where Peter meets Joy when she nearly bowls him over as she exits the Daily Bugle. Then realizing who he is, she bundles him into a taxi because they are assigned together. It is a fantastic meeting, and sets Joy up as confident and incredibly stylish, with smarts. There is a bit of white knight going on, but generally, it is a good pairing. She is fiercely independent and able, and she appears in a number of the monthly issues. It is important we appreciate the character of Joy Mercado fully: here is a good character, before we taint her based on her dialogue in these issues, which is about bad storytelling, not her being a bad character.

The "New Adventures" touted on the cover of *Web of Spider-Man #16* saw Joy introduced as Jonah J. Jameson tasks Peter to be Joy's photographer while she investigates articles for his new venture, *Now Magazine*. One can see how this would lend itself to more interesting, broader investigative adventures.

At every stage, we see a sharp, strong, well-educated, determined, and resourceful investigative journalist. Joy's look changes considerably, and where one might describe her Moon Knight style as a power dresser suit look, with Spider-Man her hair is now very big and blond, and she wears leather jackets and tight trousers with heels, very stylish and pure 1980s. Joy and Peter are put together again for this trip to Europe.

The publication date is October 1986, and in real life by that stage of the year, 50 people had been killed in the Troubles. It is two years since the IRA bombed the Grand Hotel in Brighton and the "special relationship" between President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was made clear by mail and also by phone. In his letter dated 12 October 1984 Reagan said, "As we recognized in London during the summit, terrorist violence is becoming increasingly indiscriminate and brutal, because acts such as the one last night are a growing threat to all democracies. We must work together to thwart this scourge against humanity. In the context of our special relationship, I have directed that my experts be available to work with yours to assist in bringing the perpetrators to justice."

As our journalistic duo is primed for this escapade to London in issue #19, we see that Joy already has a lead on Roxxon Enterprises, a regular Marvel evil corporation, and reckons they have dirty fingers and are involved somehow following another investigation into them. Meanwhile, Peter gets his passport, and



as Spider-Man defeats the criminal Humbug before rejoining Joy, who passes him his tickets.

The final page of issue #19 shows us a cobbled street, a Victorian-style lamp, and a strategically placed Big Ben in the night sky to give some sort of sense of place, all described as “a seedy section of London in the wee hours of the next day words and objects far more volatile are exchanged.”



Stuart Vandal noted that in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #389 (September 1982), p. 24, last paragraph of column two of *Inside Comics* by Alan Moore: “American writers and artists, when called to depict Britain, invariably decide that it looks either like modern day Chicago or that it most closely resembles beautiful downtown Bulgaria somewhere around the turn of the century.”

The three men are in a dark crate-filled storehouse huddled around a table, clearly up to no good, and we might have a hint of matters, as it has been described as being in the “wee hours.” One says to the other two, “Then we’re set, are we lads, the target is picked and tonight we strike a blow for independence.” Placing sticks of dynamite on the table he states, “A blow the whole bloody world will hear.” The final splash shows the dynamite next to flight schedules, with one flight circled.

Issue #20 sports the 25th anniversary of Marvel cover, which was uniform across all Marvel comics with the publishing date of November 1986. But the main image is the simply iconic circular Spider-Man mask which was the inspiration for the cover of this *Drink Tank* by Sara Felix.



We open with "Little Wars" and have a full-page splash with an explosion in what is identified as Heathrow Airport, with Peter and Joy having just arrived and diving for cover. Lyrics for a rebel ballad by someone called Billy Behen are also presented:

Come all you young rebels and list while I sing  
For the love of one's country is a terrible thing  
It banishes fear with the speed of the flame  
And it makes us all part of the Patriot Game

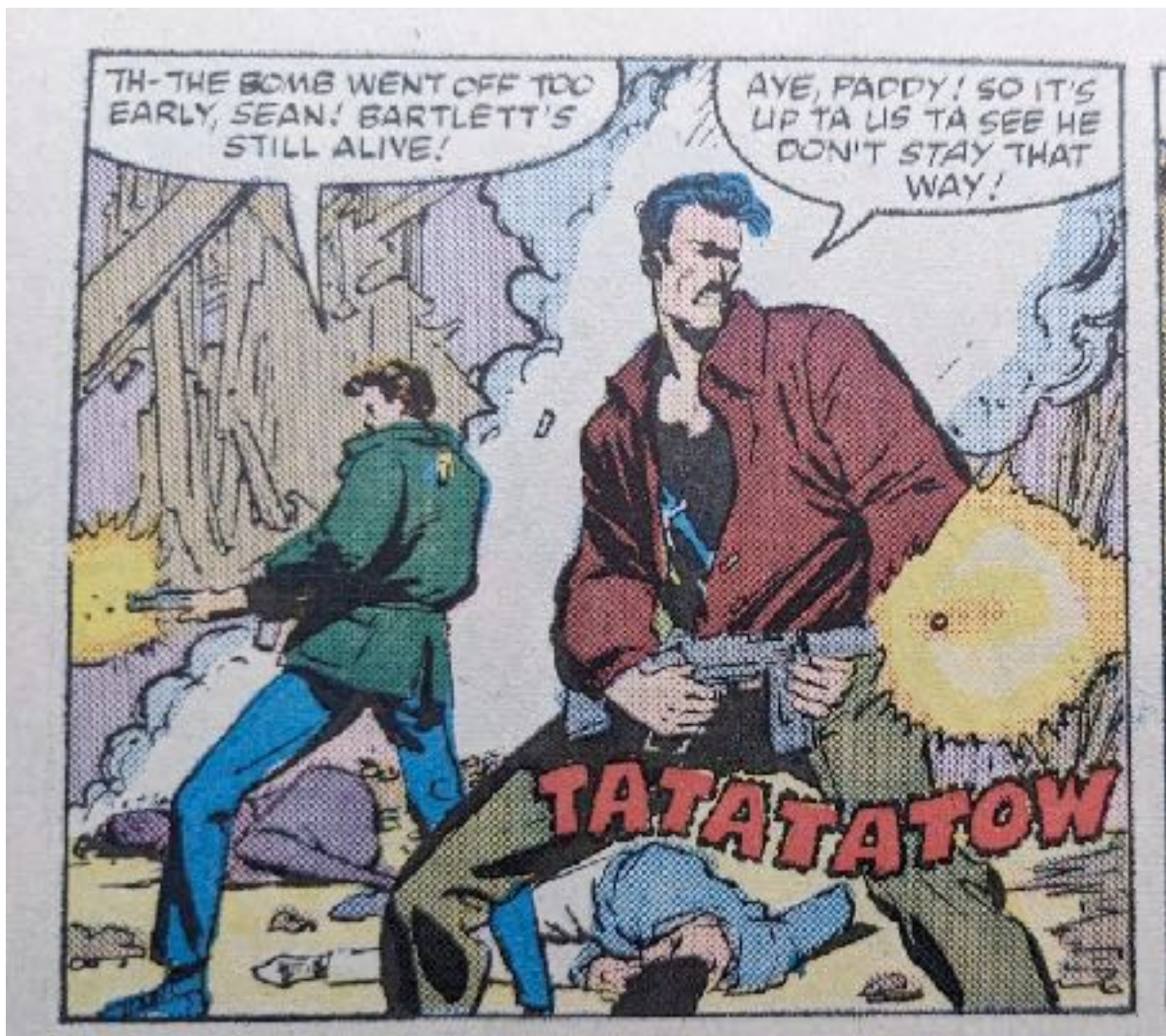




These are actually the words of "The Patriot Game," a ballad by Dominic Behan, brother of Brendan, which in its full length is more complex in its makeup. It really is unclear why Marvel changed the name of the author of the ballad. Was it to evade copyright? and why was the whole ballad not used? That may be a space-saving matter in fairness. This was not the first use of quotations in comics to give a setting, for Sean O'Casey's "Shadow of the Gunman" was used by DC Comics in the previous decade.

The changing of the credit is unsettling and questionable and ties into aspects that might challenge an informed reader. The cobblestoned gaslit London and sticks of dynamite instead of Semtex fall from the level of accuracy that one might expect or indeed hope for. It contributes to a feeling of unforced error and missed opportunity.

As the story continues in Heathrow Airport, we see two casually dressed men open up with machine guns, one calling the other "Paddy." With bullets now flying, they have somehow missed their target, someone called Bartlett. Joy tries to get a scoop from the targeted Bartlett who is now firing on the terrorists, and who



she guesses is a police officer. The scene is one of considerable devastation and we see dead bodies strewn and in the arms of others, identified as "innocent people being slaughtered" by Peter, who fears his dual identity will be revealed if he intervenes as Spider-Man.

Peter decides to take some action and we see the gunfight continue. The police, in traditionally shaped custodian helmets and badges on their uniform, feel out of place. Again, Stuart noted what was said in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #389 (September 1982), p.24, last paragraph of column 2 of *Inside Comics* by Alan Moore, continuing from the last quote: "In both instances the policemen dress like something out of Sir Robert Peel's wildest nightmares and the remainder of the characters are unable to utter the most simple sentence without getting all their aitches in the wrong place."

Historically, British police are not armed. Specialist-authorized firearm officers only became a thing in the late 1980s, and up to then weapons were kept in the station safe and were only deployed on the authority of a senior officer. However, Heathrow Airport did have armed police officers deployed from 1974 for certain situations when security was heightened.

Coincidentally, and of interest to us, on the 10th of January 1986, a *Los Angeles Times* headline read, "Police on Patrol With Submachine Guns at London's Heathrow Airport" and photos from the time show police officers in normal uniform, with flat peaked caps and Heckler and Koch submachine guns, and possibly protective vests under jackets, so the portrayal in issue #20 is not terribly wrong, and the sub-machine guns look close, but the helmets and badges are wrong.

Peter discreetly disarms one terrorist gunman who is shouting "Up the Rebels" and "Death to the Brits an' Maggie Thatcher be dam." The terrorist is dressed in a combat jacket and jeans, with an AK-style machine gun, a fair choice, even if one might think it more likely they'd use an Armalite AR-18, a US-made weapon of choice for the IRA. In disarming him, Peter brings the situation to a close.

A note now about weaponry. The US had long been a source of weapons for the IRA. Michael Flannery, an Irish volunteer and a veteran of the War of Independence and the Civil War, formed the Irish Northern Aid Committee, NORAI, in 1969, ostensibly to support families, but this was seen as a funding source for weapons. Mayoman and Pacific War veteran George Harrison had run guns to Ireland in the 1950s for the "border campaign" and in 1970 he agreed to

get weapons for the Provisional IRA. He was successful at this, spending \$1m on arms, but from 1975 onwards, he was targeted by the US Department of Justice, and both men were arrested and charged and taken to court in 1980. Fascinatingly, they were all acquitted, although those arrested during "Operation Bushmill" admitted they were gun-running, but stated they believed they had CIA sanctions. This acted though to cease the weaponry movement, while funding was also impacted by the Department of Justice taking NORaid to court forcing them to state their association with the Provisional IRA. Nothing is clear cut, but the IRA had moved from sourcing weapons from the US and had found great support from Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi who had supplied them in the 1970s but really kicked in in the 1980s, giving the IRA money, weaponry, and Semtex. In 1986 shipments increased, with 14 tons being landed in July and 80 tons in October. This was an escalation spiral, the UK supporting the US bombing of Tripoli in retaliation for the bombing of the La Belle Disco in Berlin in April that year . . .

Support in the US for the IRA was not what it was in the seventies.

As Joy and Peter leave the death and devastation, including a critically injured 6-year-old, Joy gives Peter a history lesson about Britain and Ireland:

Okay in a nutshell—Centuries ago Spanish missionaries converted the Irish population from paganism to Catholicism. So England was afraid that Spain would use Ireland as a base for an invasion, colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants. Ever since the Republic of Ireland has tried to unify the country by taking over Northern Ireland—which resists and is backed by England, protecting its interests there.

Peter replies, "You mean- that's why innocent people are being killed every day? Because of a threat that hasn't existed for hundreds of years?"

"Welcome to the real world Pete," says Joy.

This leaves Peter and the reader asking which "real world" is Marvel in? Is this some sort of Earth-333 where Dominic is Billy, history is fictional, and in the words of Irish comic fan Tony Roche: "The Spaniards . . . who knew?"

Pádraig Ó Méalóid added, "Earth-1916, maybe?"

Stuart said, "Maybe it was the Spanish Inquisition. Nobody would have expected that . . ."

This was such an unexpected explanation, that Pádraig bravely decided to unpack this as a separate article that looks at these few lines in more historical detail. Suffice it to say, at this stage, that the Marvel portrayal is a very poor, inaccurate, and confused account, and totally disappointing. Maybe this is indeed



a Marvel fantastical take on history, but is that how Marvel portrayed American historical events?

Stuart Vandal noted, "My best guess is that they actually thought that was the origins of the issues between Ireland and England way back in the past, the thing that caused England to invade, which only goes to show just how little Americans (and most people, honestly) know about history. To be fair, we have people today who don't know the main countries that fought in World War II, and we've got less of an excuse for that kind of ignorance thanks to having access to the internet."

And yes, though no examples are springing to mind right now, Marvel has at times been just as bizarrely inaccurate with other historical events from countries across the world. American history they tend to mess up less egregiously.

"Officially Ireland's history in the Marvel Universe is identical to the real world except for the presence of aliens, supernatural beings, and superhumans. But real-world history should be largely the same," added Stuart, to which Pádraig butted in once more to suggest that we already had all the supernatural beings we could handle, thank you, without anyone having to invent any more . . .

And so, Stuart mentioned the "Leprechauns of Cassidy Keep" from X-Men #103 . . . and Wee One of the Irish national superhero team the Kinsmen - yep, another leprechaun.

It is clear that support in the US for the IRA was being curtailed, but was this impacting storytelling at Marvel Comics? It is hard to know now what direction this story will take. The historical explanation which while totally wrong, does seem to emphasize the pointlessness of the Troubles, this might mean that there is an attempt to seek a balanced view, that all war is pointless, rather than attributing blame to one side or another. If we consider that the campaign had been going on for eighteen years in 1986, it might be that the civil rights issues, the one person one vote, the bigotry, and dreadful discrimination against Catholics, have all faded into the past, and not as strongly associated with the situation as it might be felt by those enduring it. The terrorists so far have been portrayed as brutal killers, with no concern for innocents, which while not unfair, is unbalanced but we do not know what direction the story is going.

We follow Joy and Peter as they are driven through London, a couple of clumsy-looking red double-deckers helping to orient the reader in the city. Joy and Peter go for dinner and afterward, they allegedly get early nights, but Joy has a "snitch" and while she tries to bring Peter into the situation, Peter has already

snuck out, so Joy heads out to get details on Roxxon. After checking on the six-year-old who is reported as still in critical condition after the Heathrow attack, Peter feels challenged by his inactivity and fear of being discovered at Heathrow and also by his desire to do his actual photojournalist job and he decides to take some action. He heads out into the night and breaks into a prison, where we see our lone terrorist shouting 'Up the Rebels an' Death ta anyone who'd keep Ireland divided' through the cell bars. The shock of seeing Spider-Man in the black costume elicits a "Saints preserve me . . . banshees black as midnight?!" and gives Spider-Man the opportunity to interrogate him.

With the information gathered, Spidey now stalks the terrorist team, finding two guards outside their hideout and seven men inside. Sneaking in, Spidey listens as new plans are discussed. The leader Sean Dunne says "'Tis fer Ireland we're united, lads, and 'tis a United Ireland we're fighting for-ta the death," which is followed up with, "And fer the Red Hand," and both Spidey and the reader are asking, "Red Hand?"

Now, is this a reference to the Red Hand of Ulster, a heraldic symbol dating back to 1243 when it was used by Walter de Burgh, a Hiberno-Norman and the first Earl of Ulster?

The symbol was also used later by the O'Neills, when they created a Kingship of Ulster, and the symbol is used across the community, from the Irish Citizen Army who fought in 1916 for independence, to the more modern Red Hand Commando, a branch of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a Protestant terrorist organization formed in 1970, and who on 14 July 1986 claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Castlewellan, County Down, that injured two people. This to me, as a reader, was a very interesting turn of phrase to hear. The Red Hand Commando were very unusual, even though they sought to maintain British control of Northern Ireland and fight against Republicanism, their motto was in Irish, Lamh Dearg Abu



which means "Red Hand to Victory." I was left wondering if there was some future additional complexity awaiting the reader, which might be exciting, or just some odd misunderstanding going on.

Stuart reckoned, "I'd imagine it was that the writer just didn't realize that the Red Hand by the 1980s was associated with Protestant terrorists. A lot of Americans honestly didn't seem to realize there was such a thing as Unionist terrorists, seeming to believe there were two sides – the British Army and the IRA."

No one I spoke to subscribes to the idea that writers should not be allowed to write about stuff "outside their lane" but a little research is beholden upon them to at least avoid errors of this nature.

There's more "Up the Rebels" and then the police turn up surprising both the terrorists and Spidey, but Spidey battles the terrorists inside while a gunfight ensues. The weapons all resemble real ones to a degree and one can see shotguns, an AK47, an Uzi, an Armalite, and a sniper rifle. The police use "gas rockets" and even with Spidey on the inside, seven terrorists manage to escape through tunnels.



The next day, Joy and Peter are on their way to Parliament, passing Tower Bridge in a terribly incongruous yellow taxicab. Not New York, lads. Black cabs here. Geography has also taken a backseat here, as they appear to be driving





east away from Tower Bridge on the north side, which also means away from the House of Parliament, especially as there is no road on the south side of the river, just the Queens Walk, a pedestrian area along the river. And yet it still does a better job than the cover of *Amazing Spider-Man* #95.

While Margaret Thatcher is making a speech, Peter notices that there are sewer works taking place outside, and he recalls what he heard the night before. A terrorist guarding the manhole bemoans a lack of action and thinks "I shoulda brought me a Walkman – a little U2 would go down real easy 'bout now . . ." as Spidey slips past him unnoticed, into the sewer, where he finds explosives and "Sean Dunne! And what's left of his Provo Guerillas." He takes on the four of them before they can detonate the explosives, at one time being called a "Prancin' Dervish."

A grenade goes off, which Spidey narrowly evades, but he has a moment and is left contemplating the line between commitment and fanaticism. Subsequently, he rejoins Joy, back in shirt, suit, and tie as Peter, and we see the arrested terrorists being led away, with one seriously maimed terrorist wheeled away on a gurney as he utters "U . . . Up . . . the Rebels..."

Pádraig noted, "I think of all the playing fast and loose with both history and current events at the time, this might be the one that boils my piss the most. There is simply no way on Earth that anyone was going to get to go into the sewers under the Houses of Parliament without about a million bits of paper and clearances being involved, and probably from months in advance too. It simply is not credible that this would happen, particularly if it was being masterminded by a



bunch of lads whose most cogent commentary on what they were about was to keep saying 'Up da rebels!' every few minutes. Jesus, there is another one . . ."

Terrorists blowing up Parliament is not a new concept. In the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Guy Fawkes and fellow Catholic conspirators attempted to blow up Parliament and kill James I, so there is a hint of that here.

Determined to figure out what is going on, Joy insists they must go to Ireland, but Peter notes how they only have funding to see the speech. Joy laments that she would have liked to have 'gotten the scoop on the Red Hand...', which registers with Peter. When Inspector Barlett turns up and lets Peter and Joy know that the six-year-old died, the journalists decide they will go to Dublin, on their own dime if they have to.

Issue #21 sees Joy and Peter on a ferry on their way to Dublin. Peter has a cold which brings him back to New York. This gives us the opportunity for a flashback story that is worth including here. Someone is impersonating Spider-Man and committing crimes, so Spider-Man comes off his sick bed and tries to figure it out. The story is reflective, in a way. The impersonator is actually the son of a man who was killed by armed bank robbers some time previously. As the robbers fled the scene of a crime, Spider-Man tried to apprehend them, so they took an older female bystander hostage. Her husband valiantly tried to free her and was shot dead. Spider-Man of course recalls this, and the self-justification of "I didn't pull the trigger." Later, Mary Jane affirms that "No one is perfect." Spider-Man defeats the imposter and prevents him from doing something that might be "a terrible mistake that you can never live down." Spider-Man is cleared, and the imposter is imprisoned. It is a fascinating justification, and one does need to consider that without Spider-Man that man's father would be alive. There must be some question as to the total lack of consequences for Peter. Where would a vigilante stand if their actions saw someone killed?

In this instance, I asked Mike Glycer for a view who said; "The superhero genre seems designed to deliver those BIFF! SMASH! and POW! moments. And it's more dramatic for the vigilante superhero to interrupt three gun-toting robbers during a crime in progress than perhaps to shadow the crooks and maybe even wait until they've put down their weapons to count their loot before confronting them. The risk to victims and bystanders is highest here while the criminals are trying to get away. Of course, to paraphrase a line from *Henry V*, Spider-Man did not purpose the husband's death when he intervened. And while it's a little daring that the writer would show a bad outcome from Spider-Man's intervention, it

proves to be not very daring, since now Spider-Man feels his actions are even more justified because he's caught not robbers, but killers. A kind of short-circuited ethical argument. A conclusion that is driven home by the news coverage being led by a buffoon, while in contrast Spider-Man's girlfriend props him up – and when you're a young guy in New York, what your girlfriend thinks is what counts.”

This is an interesting story by Larry Lieber, a standalone flashback, and Lieber also did the art. This may well be a filler story, held for use when production of the intended story was running late. Marvel used to do that semi-regularly. The opening intro by the ongoing story’s artist would have been a last-minute thing to justify the sudden and unexpected break from the main tale.

On the last page of the comic, we return to Joy and Peter on the ferry, arriving at an interesting-looking Dublin. Maybe the tall building pictured is Liberty Hall; it is hard to know. They rent a car and head north, and the last panel shows them on the outskirts of Belfast. But we only see their shocked faces as Peter asks, “Oh my Gosh W . . . Wh . . . What Happened?’ The issue closes with the tagline for the next issue, “Raging Aire.”



There is much potential at this stage. Terrorism was a serious matter, the connections between the USA and Ireland were strong, the desire for freedom from colonialism common, and one might expect that some bomb-damaged community or the scene of public disorder was at hand in the next issue. The mention of the Red Hand and the brutality and frequency of attacks were both fixing to be very interesting.

Issue #22 opens with a vision that leaves readers even more shocked than Peter as he says, “You sure this is Belfast, Joy? It looks more like Berlin – during World War II.”

He is right. We see billowing smoke from the ruins of destroyed buildings, and it does resemble a city having been carpet-bombed, with an M3-style US World War II half-track fitted with a heavy gun on its rear, utterly out of place. What a very unexpected first page.

The second page shows Peter taking photos as the half-track, carrying soldiers in M1 American-style WWII helmets being targeted by a petrol bomb. Page 3 shows us that this is an M13 Multiple Gun Motor Carriage built by the White Motor Company during WWII as the close-up of the gun shows them clearly to be a pair of .50 heavy-barrel Browning machine guns in an M33 Maxson mount.

This is terribly wrong; such a weapon was not used in Northern Ireland. Additionally, we even see a Captain's rank bars on one of the helmets, insignia that is American and incompatible with British ranks.

We then see an Uzi-armed terrorist, with an interestingly shaped hood, neither the face mask nor balaclava that was normally worn by the IRA, and a gunfight ensues, and then the soldiers use terms like "boot" as they check out Peter and Joy but explain they mean the "troonk" but identify the terrorists as "Bloody Black Hoods." One assumes they are republican, but it is not clear.

Suddenly, Joy and Peter are in a nicer part of town, with many fine buildings. They walk along leafy roads and come to a modern office building that Joy identifies as Roxxon but are distracted by some army trucks. The change to the city is unreal; is this an attempt at West Belfast and the city center? Because it does not work at all well.







"SOMETHING TELLS ME THIS IS MORE THE WORK OF OUR MYSTERIOUS BLACK WOODS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT THOUGH. WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?"



"WHATEVER THEIR MOTIVES, THEY ARE SUCCEEDING AT SCARING THE LOCALS TO DEATH."



"--NOT THAT I BLAME THEM FOR BEING AFRAID. I CAN'T SAY I ENVY THE GUYS IN THAT BOMB SQUAD."

The army trucks, again out of place, might be US M39 5-ton 6x6 trucks, or the older WWII-style 6x6 6-ton truck. Either way, very wrong, as is the reference to the soldiers entering "that housing project." We might allow Peter to use this word instead of "flats," although while flats, these look nothing like the Divis flats or flat blocks in Belfast at all.

The locals are rioting and throwing fruit and vegetables at shielded soldiers.



Fruit and vegetables. We may be well into the time of peace, but this year, April 2023 there is footage of youths running down a road in the Creggan in Derry at a dissident parade and throwing petrol bombs at an armored PSNI Land Rover.

It appears that a flat has been bombed and its occupant, Liam, is hiding now from the Army who have gone in to deal with the aftermath. Joy and Peter work to keep him hidden and then ask him some questions. Liam tells them that the Black Hoods are trying to kill him, and he is trying to figure out what happened to his brother who went missing some time ago.

Liam takes Joy and Peter to a pub, where he introduces them as reporters. The locals tell them about when "Those Black Hoods showed up" and the indiscriminate bombings and killings that have followed, lamenting that "Most o' them terrorist blokes, they'll spread their message around" but there no demands have been communicated. The story shifts as it's shared. The locals tell Peter and Joy that the Black Hoods are "Just killin' and bombing Catholics, Protestants, police, soldiers, children – doesn't make any difference to them."

At this point one starts to feel a divergence: could the Black Hoods be undercover soldiers, a false flag operation, or criminals? Whatever the answer, it is definitely a turn of events. I note that Black Hoods have not been mentioned in previous issues, that the Red Hand is not mentioned either and the IRA has slipped away into the shadows. One is left wondering if they are a new Republican organization. There were many splits and some brutally fearsome terrorist organizations. Is this an even more hardcore organization? Peter buys a second round of drinks, as someone observing the discussion heads out.

As Peter and Joy leave, Joy is convinced that the "Hoods" are part of some Roxxon malarky, and they are soon surrounded by five men in black hoods brandishing pistols and Uzis. Peter and Joy are seized and hooded themselves.

At this juncture, the story takes quite the fantastical turn, unfortunately, as Joy and Peter are unhooded at the Roxxon building and Ian Forbes introduces himself. In true villainous form, he explains that he has designed and built the AK-X anti-personnel particle beam cannon for the Americans, a tracked fantastical weapon, totally out of place here. Unfortunately for Roxxon, the Pentagon canceled the order as the weapon is not stable and can overheat and explode. Ian Forbes is now using other means to recoup their research and development losses. The plan seems to be that since the Middle East is a market closed off to

Roxxon, they have worked to create a situation where there soon will be an arrangement with the "Government of England."

"Atomic Cannons, Secret Agents, Terrorists!" Peter exclaims and indeed there is an MI5 agent, Duncan O'Neill, who is loyal to Roxxon, helping to set the scene and warn MI5 that the Black Hoods are a "well-equipped revolutionary movement that poses an immediate and direct threat to the security of England." They, the Black Hoods, are of course under the pay of Roxxon, to escalate matters and help convince England to buy a particle-beam weapon.

What a turn. Marvel is of course inherently fantastical, there is no denying that, but one might have felt that the story here was grounded, or attempted to be grounded in reality, but here previous actions, descriptions, killings, narrative, and spoken words are left to one side, as we segue suddenly into a very different feeling story.

While Peter struggles with a situation where he would have to reveal his identity to Joy, in order to help them effect an escape, Liam turns up and frees them. This allows Peter to discreetly get his Spidey costume on and take down some Black Hoods. They get desperate as one says, "Saints Alive! He's still coming," and Spidey intimidates a Hood into giving up.



Meanwhile, Ian Forbes and Duncan retreat to the roof to escape via helicopter. The Black Hoods have captured Joy and Liam and are going to kill them, possibly by throwing them off the same roof. Spidey leaps into action, albeit he is not needed as Joy puts up her own fight, and Liam shoots one of the Hoods when he has a bead on Joy.

There's a twist now that is quite clever. One of the Hoods who was shot calls out Liam's name, and lo and behold, it is Liam's missing brother Rory, who was on the Roxxon payroll as a Black Hood. He dies in his brother's arms. This is quite an emotional and dramatic turn, a bittersweet twist, with brother against brother which could have been brilliantly executed to mirror or act as a metaphor for the wider conflict, that was actually ongoing and in the background of a potential story about the Troubles, which is wasted then on the Roxxon element. The concept is not new, but brothers fighting one another in the Irish Civil War is actually a good strong narrative turn, even if it was guessable to some extent, I am unsure of instances in Northern Ireland, given the politico-religious divide but as a concept for a war story, it could have been figured out here, rather than having to invoke the big evil corporation trope.



While there is victory, there is the air of defeat as Forbes and O'Neill have escaped. Terribly frustrated, Liam has had "enough of killin' an' shootin'!" and our story is at an end for the trio. We subsequently see a helicopter blow up, and some unnamed person inside Roxxon is happy that the situation is resolved as "Forbes had cost us too much."

In the world of Marvel, Roxxon is a corrupting and evil corporation, the largest petrochemical company in the world, appearing first in *Captain America* #180 in 1974, and in over 300 Marvel comics since, as recently as 2021 in *Champions* (Volume 4) #5.

Issue #23 shows Peter and Joy flying home to New York. Joy is really angry with Peter, as she reckons he doesn't take his work seriously, and in fairness, she is right. Peter is frequently too challenged in his dual role to manage either job well. The photographs are good, but soon Silver Sable catches Spidey's attention, and we leave Ireland behind.

As a story, there was so much potential to the idea. There are interesting elements, but in execution it all seems to go astray, marked by disappointing inaccuracy and lack of research. Ultimately it is a missed opportunity, and if anything, there is such a lack of cohesiveness that it feels hollow.

It should be said that these are comics, at the time 40p or 75 cents, and are meant as light entertainment. 1986 was a big year for comics. Frank Miller was on fire with *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: Year One*, and *Daredevil: Born Again*, Alan Moore was equally impressive, with *Watchmen*, *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (Volume 3), *Swamp Thing*, and *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, while *Crisis on Infinite Earths* by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez came to its 12-part end, *Maus* (Volume 1) by Art Spiegelman was published, and *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez Brothers was winning awards and gaining in popularity.

*Eclipse's Real War Stories* and *Brought to Light* were one and two years away respectively, so hard-hitting reflections of real situations in comics, while extant, when we see *Maus*, may have been a bit out of reach for Marvel. But there actually was a concerted effort to change the direction of *Web of Spider-Man*.

The "Little Wars" story offered so much. It is a tantalizing tease to the reader, wherein Joy and Peter actually investigate an element of the Troubles. The Marvel team could have pursued a different but similar story: a brother mistakenly killing a brother, showing the violence as pointless and without reason,



investigating the history and issues, and so on. This would have been so interesting, but the story as it never delivers. In 1986, maybe it was impossible for it to do so.

The Red Hand seems to disappear in future issues, without further reference. Perhaps it will arise again in a later Roxxon story, but here an element that could have been very interesting is instead a dead end. In general, the Roxxon element is just unfortunate. The story with a particle beam soon becomes way too fantastical, and the segue from "Provos" and "Irish Republican Army terrorists" to Black Hoods is clumsy and untidy. A poor move overall, it all feels so horribly quick to resolve.

Readers will have to seek out the 2002 comic *Punisher* (Volume 6) #18 where the Red Hand Commando does show up again though here they are explicitly Protestant Northern Irish paramilitary. The reason for this more accurate depiction of their allegiance is undoubtedly because this story was written by Northern Irish writer Garth Ennis.

The 1986 attempt to make Irish characters sound Irish is not always brutally appalling. At times, it does at least sound slightly realistic, and while it is also used to set a tone, it is not needed. Better use of the narrative and more detailed descriptions would have improved the story. I am grateful that there is no "Begorrah" in these issues, but the explanation of the history of the Troubles from Joy is really quite poor.

Why did the issues lack cohesiveness and reward? Well, maybe it was about the Marvel Way at the time. Here is who was working on the issues: Marc Silvestri penciled, David Michelinie wrote, Jim Owsley edited issue #19, and Maddie Blaustein helped co-edit issue #20 with this team. Larry Lieber penciled and wrote issue #21, while Jim Owsley - now known as Christopher James Priest - edited it. Finally, Marc Silvestri penciled, Len Kaminski wrote, and Jim Salicrup edited issue #22.

Why all the changes I wondered. What was going on? The answer to my disappointment is surprising, however.

Marvel Comics received a bomb threat.

I was not ready for that revelation. I was then helpfully pointed toward two articles on the Comic Book Resources website: Brian Cronin's "Comic Book Legends Revealed" #312, published on 6 May 2011, and "Why Marvel Was Forced to Change Spider-Man - Over a Bomb Threat!," published on 21 November 2021.

Len Kaminski shared the details with Brian and has said to me directly that he stands by what he said:

It was originally a two-parter plotted by David Michelinie; the Irritated (allegedly) Residents (I only heard stuff second-hand, I wasn't answering phones that week) Aggrieved made their objections Quite Sincerely Known to Marvel via Mr. Graham Bell's remarkable invention.

I can directly confirm that not only Marvel, but ALL OTHER OFFICES at the 387 Park Avenue South location had themselves a very hastily organized surprise fire drill, emptying the building entirely (with the unexpected result of proving once and for all that the human contents of 387 PAS, when removed from the ten-story structure and redistributed on a single plane (in this case, Manhattan sidewalk), would, in fact, completely encircle the block demarcated by 387 PAS, E28th St, E27th St. and 3rd Avenue) in ranks approximately 8-15 humunits (a measurement coined by Gruenwald of course) deep.

Again, I did not take that call myself, but multiple sources told me outright this move was inspired by several calls that morning claiming there was an explosive device somewhere close by, and that there was a causal relationship between the previously mentioned SPIDEY story and Things That Go Boom.

Then-editor Jim Owsley hired me to re-write the second half to remove the elements that had been objected to. Overnight. Using the existing word balloons, which had been whited out. Sort of the cage-match x-treme version of the old-skool DC practice of cooking up an insane cover, then making the writer create a story to justify it somehow, crossed with MadLibs reimagined as a blood sport.

I can't . . . ever . . . talk about the all-nighter I pulled Getting It Done. Go read both halves in light of this new information . . . and IMAGINE – it could have been – YOU!!”

Editor Christopher Priest also spoke about it on his website:

We sent out an issue of Michelinie's WEB that dealt with the IRA and the politics of Ireland that got us both national attention and a bomb threat. I returned from lunch to find everyone in the building standing on the street

while the bomb squad combed the building for explosives (there were none, it was a hoax).

Thanks to Karen Green, Danny Fingerioth also noted for this article:

I recall there was a bomb threat but I was freelancing then, so not sure if I was in the office at the time or not. (We also got numerous bomb threats in the '70s, but not about Northern Ireland.)

Danny may be referencing the occasion that Roy Thomas made mention of at New Mexico Comic Expo in 2019, "In the early 1970s, the Marvel offices were two floors below the offices of *National Lampoon*. . . . Apparently, the *Lampoon* had published something that led to someone mailing some dynamite to their offices. While they did not take it too seriously (some staff members played catch with the explosives), they did decide it was a good idea to tell their neighbors downstairs."

That is certainly a turn-up for the books! I had not at all expected that, and fair play to Brian Cronin for uncovering this revelation!

I wondered what the original story was like, Len noted to me directly:

No idea what David's plans were, only that I was told to eliminate all political content and end the story arc.

The original version was thrown back at Owsley by Shooter with a mandate to "fix it." Owz hired me on to re-dialogue it overnight.

This of course totally changes my understanding. Initially, I was disappointed as the lack of cohesiveness was frustrating. The sharp turn from realistic issues into a fantastical story -- tame and lame. Initially, I was wondering whether this was an internal issue, or whether the pause and change between writers caused a bigger change of direction than was initially planned. Was there some problem in the bullpen? The set-up for the story was so good, but that all fell apart once they started ignoring the serious matters in Ireland at the time. It just felt like a poor choice.

I was wrong.

I was on the right track in the sense that the story was intentionally diluted, but I hadn't anticipated an external action being the catalyst for the change.

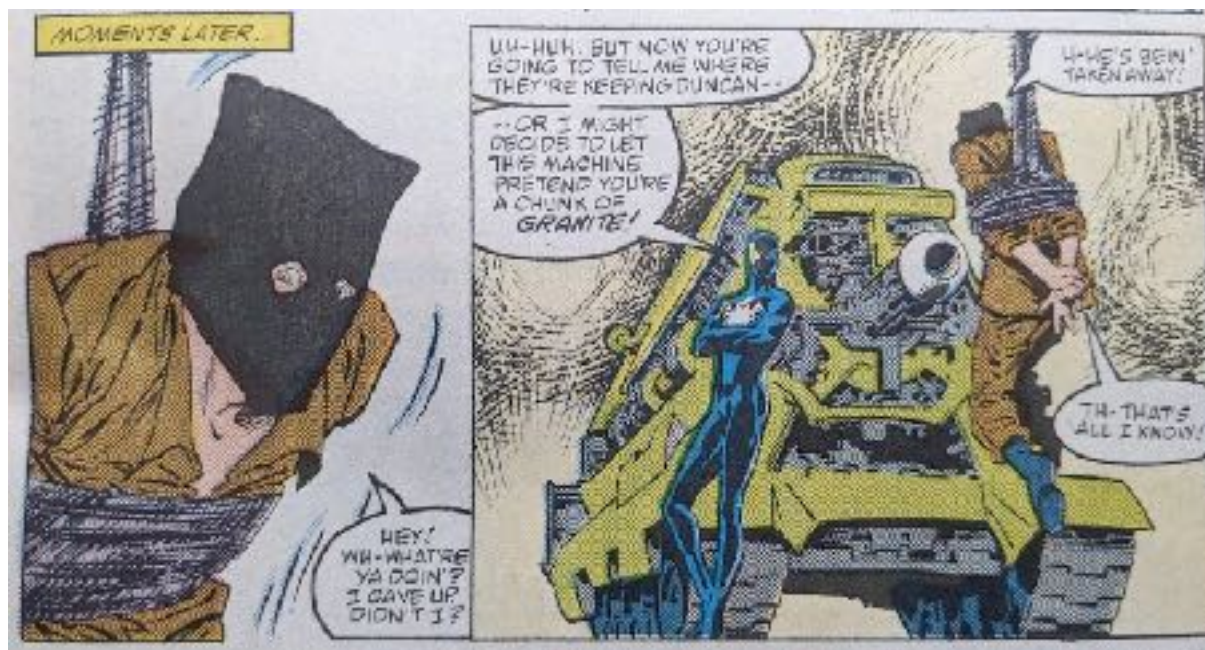
Readers can only approve of any action that protects comic creatives. Any threat to them is appalling and any action in response is totally understandable.

Given the situation, it is now a little more understandable that the skilled Marc Silvestri, who we know can draw a really stunning Spider-Man, may have been told to make radical changes. Maybe creating a Berlin scene, and US-styled gear was an explicit directive. Or perhaps given the rushed nature of what was happening and the obvious anxiety that a real-life bomb threat would have caused, he used his initiative and altered the visuals to make them unidentifiable in comparison.

I must now try and speak to Marc and David if possible. More research!

While one must be understanding about the heavy change of direction, we must consider that some story aspects were not great, as demonstrated the history was appalling, but names such as "Paddy," "Sean," and "Liam" are pulled straight from the stereotype drawer, while the dialogue, when I read it out loud, is not appalling, it does miss the mark in some respects, "be dam" is not exactly common, I don't think I have ever heard it used, and as Pádraig noted to me, farthings were last legal currency in the UK in 1970, and shillings (or bobs, which are also mentioned, and are the same thing) were superseded by the 5p coin with the change to decimalization in 1971. And as Chris said to me, if you want to blame someone, the "Spanish, Turks, and Mexicans are as good as any!"

Initially, I heard of the story when Eugene Doherty presented it in a panel about the comic portrayal of Ireland in the early 2000s. At that stage, there was surprise at the portrayal of Belfast, despite the realities of the Troubles, and the poor portrayal was met with astonishment and laughter.





One has to be charitable when considering research capabilities in the age before the Internet. The portrayal of uniforms, cityscapes, and vehicles all fail at varying times. However, one just should not have a yellow taxicab in London. A small bit of library research or just some thoughtful mental arousal about cultural aspects would have offered sufficient images to use as research for accuracy. Art that captures Spidey so brilliantly, with great movement and dynamism, needs also to be rounded and detailed. Maybe for the American reader, such details were of little relevance but was this also a form of poor education, with a failed presentation of historical truth, unfortunate if believed?

There is no connection between the covers and the comic. The 25th Anniversary issue is bland, Issue #21 features New York, and perhaps already ready with the filler story for an emergency, and then a swinging Spider-Man on the cover of issue #22 looks like he is flying through New York, not in Belfast – while an interesting cover by Mark Beachum and Art Nichols this is, like the others, disconnected from the story.

The covers leave one with questions. Were they the ones that were planned or were there other ones that were quickly canceled or changed like the issues themselves? This leaves many questions. What were David's original scripts like? Were there any original pencils already created, and is there any copy of the planned script in existence, so we can see "What If?"

Spider-Man was a big deal in 1986. It was a good-selling comic and a popular character, and 1986 was a big year for comics as they matured. Who would have believed that a smart story would be curtailed by real-life actions?

Art reflecting what was happening in real life, then becoming impacted by real-life reflecting the art is quite a thing. Spider-Man is and was important. As an Irish child, I had watched the Spider-Man cartoon and can still recite the jingle. I also really liked Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends, with Firestar and Iceman. These were shown later in the UK, and in Dublin, we got the UK channels, but there were Corgi toys and Spider-Man was known to us.

That Spider-Man had the impact, was so important, culturally speaking, that someone called in a bomb threat to halt a story vilifying the IRA-adjacent characters beggars belief, but this was the situation. The authorities reckoned comic books could be influential, like Captain America speaking out against drugs, but surely this was a step beyond what was expected, that an active terrorist group, sophisticated, well-funded, and brutal would pause, and deter a comic

story portraying them by phoning in a bomb threat. It is hard to know if this was someone acting in sympathy with, or officially on behalf of the Provisional IRA.

Stuart noted, "There's a sad irony to it, assuming it was genuinely the IRA and not just some supporter of them acting of his own accord. 'How dare you portray us as murderers who would blow up innocents! If you keep doing this, we'll blow you up . . . thus proving we do indeed blow up innocents.'"

That is some effort required when changing a storyline in a comic. Did anyone realize how some people must have felt? currently under US federal law making a false bomb threat that "may reasonably be believed" may result in fining or imprisonment for up to five years, so it is not a light-hearted thing to do, and in some regards, it speaks to the impact of the comic, how some may have felt the portrayal could damage their standing or cause, and so much aid came from the USA.

Did David M realize when he started, or Chris Priest, that a comic story could see a real threat upon Marvel?

The whole situation leaves many aspects unanswered, but this is not the fault of the writers, artists, and editors. It is easy now, 27 years later, to critique, but what cannot be easy to second guess is how it felt to know you, your work, and your workplace had been targeted by terrorists, for telling a comic book story. A story that was then eviscerated of its potential, not allowed to come to fruition, forced to change.

Every way we look at it, this is a troubling story and one that leaves one shocked at how the real world could interfere and derail something as simple as a Spider-Man story.

## Notes

- Many thanks to Allison Hartman Adams, Rob Hansen, Danny Fingerth, Mike Glycer, Karen Green, Will Howard, Len Kaminski, Pádraig Ó Méalóid, Tony Roche, Stuart Vandal, and Vic Whittle for support, input, and insight with this article, and to Eugene Doherty who presented a program item about this at Octocon.
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- *Web of Spiderman* #19 - #23, Marvel Comics.

- "The IRA's Links with Nazi Germany" by David O'Donoghue
- <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/InterpretativeResources/HistoricalContext/TheIRAslinkswithNaziGermany/>
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- *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Féin* by Brendan O'Brien
- *Her Majesty's Most Disloyal Opposition: Irish America and the Making of US Policy Toward Northern Ireland* by Abi McGowan, The Ohio State University <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/323062074.pdf#page=33>
- <https://www.christopherpriest.com/comics/adventures/frames/spidey.htm>
- <https://www.cbr.com/spider-man-web-forced-change-bomb-threat>
- <https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-312/>
- [https://spiderfan.org/review/comics/spiderman\\_web/020.html](https://spiderfan.org/review/comics/spiderman_web/020.html) by Kerry Wilkinson
- <https://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/1985/1985-03Capital.html>
- In March 1985, *Web of Spider-Man* #4 was the fourth best seller, *Amazing Spider-Man* #266 was eleventh, and *Peter Parker, Spectacular Spider-Man* #104 was sixteenth.

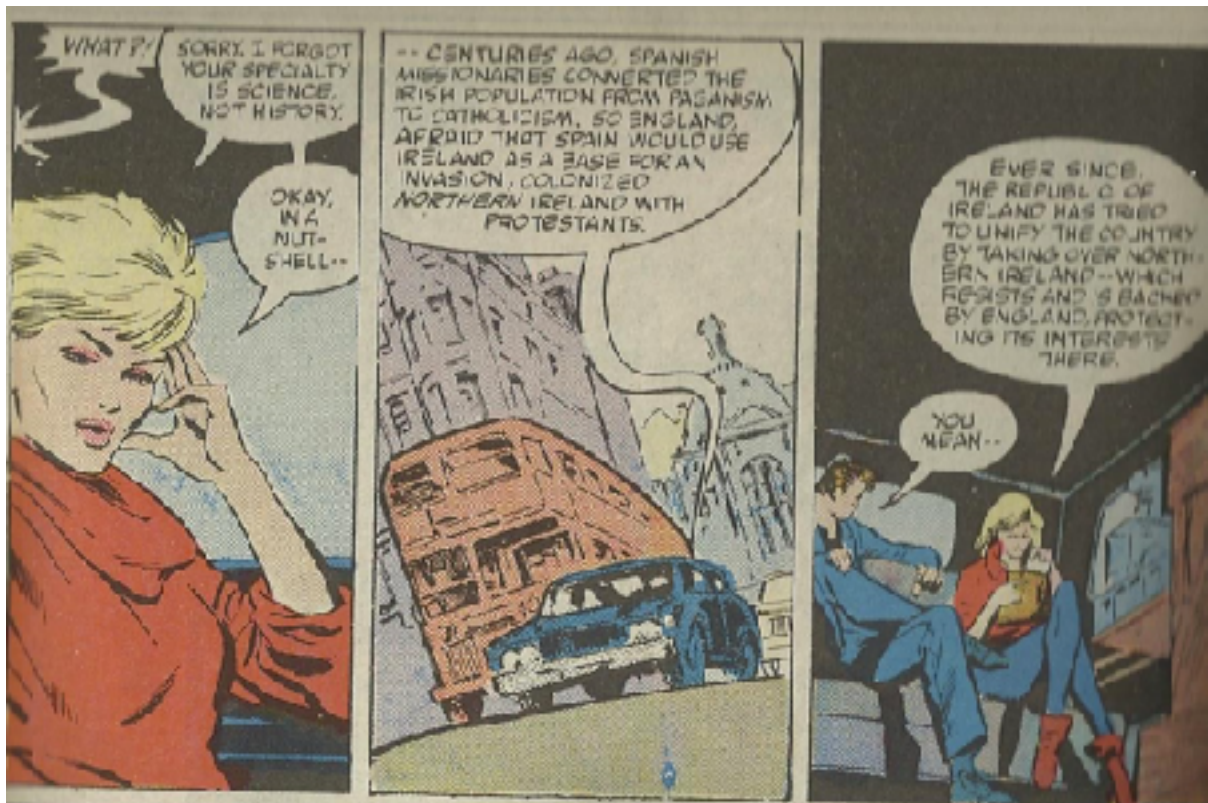
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# In Response to James Bacon

by Pádraig Ó Méalóid



James Bacon wrote to me:

1986. *Web of Spider-Man* features the IRA. Now at one stage, the Troubles are explained, by Joy Mercado to Peter Parker and I wanted to share this explanation and wondered if you might calmly read it, and then give a view, as to how and why it is inaccurate . . .

Joy gives Peter a history lesson about Britain and Ireland . . .

“Okay in a nutshell – Centuries ago Spanish missionaries converted the Irish population from paganism to Catholicism. So, England was afraid that Spain would use Ireland as a base for an invasion, colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants

“Ever since the Republic of Ireland has tried to unify the country by taking over Northern Ireland – which resists and is backed by England, protecting its interests there.

“‘You mean- that's why innocent people are killed daily? Because of a threat that hasn't existed for hundreds of years,’ says Peter.

“‘Welcome to the real world Pete’ says Joy.”

And, although I have been bending James’s ear back many times since with various opinions about not just this piece, but about the larger story surrounding it, I did largely try to stay calm, and work my way through it . . .

So, here goes:

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As I go through this piece by piece, I want to define several words and terms that are used in it that I think are either being used loosely or being used entirely incorrectly, which therefore might be open to misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

Let me start with this, which has numerous erroneous assumptions in it: *“Centuries ago Spanish missionaries converted the Irish population from paganism to Catholicism. So, England was afraid that Spain would use Ireland as a base for an invasion, colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants.”*

The conversion of the people of Ireland to Christianity didn’t happen all at once, but most accounts agree that a significant date in this was when Pope Celestine I sent Palladius to Ireland “to the Scotti believing in Christ” in the year 431 (The Scotti here being a Latin term for the people of Ireland, which was later

transferred to Scotland). It would appear that there were some Christians in Ireland before that, but records are sparse and unauthoritative. So, saying it happened “centuries ago,” whilst factually accurate, is very vague, and certainly doesn’t convey just how many centuries were actually involved. (Patrick came a little later.)

There’s not really anything I can say about “*Spanish missionaries converted the Irish population*” except to state that this is categorically untrue. However, Spanish missionaries did bring Christianity to what was then known as the New World, mostly meaning the Americas, but this was not until the sixteenth century, more than a thousand years after Palladius and Patrick came to Ireland. Perhaps Ms. Mercado was of Latin American extraction, and simply presumed that, if the Spanish had sent missions to the Americas, they would previously have done the same for Ireland, which was much closer.

Now to this: “*from paganism to Catholicism.*” It certainly seems to have been the case that there was a widespread religion referred to these days as Celtic paganism, of which there is extensive evidence spread across the landscape of Ireland, and indeed throughout Western Europe. But this was supplanted by Christianity, rather than Catholicism *per se*. Although there was really only one main strain of Christianity in Western Europe in the fifth century, it is particularly important here not to conflate Christianity with Catholicism in an Irish context, for more recent historical reasons, which I will be coming to later.

“*So, England . . .*” Although we now understand England as referring to a very rigidly defined geographical area, if we’re talking about that same area in the fifth century, that would not have been the case. This would take far too long to go into here, so I’m not going to. In any case, I get the impression that the “facts” being presented here have conflated events over quite a stretch of Irish history, so while it is certainly true that England, and its regional predecessors, interfered in the affairs of Ireland, they weren’t really doing so at the time that Christianity first came to Ireland.

Quite separately from that, the statement that “*Spain would use Ireland as a base for an invasion*” doesn’t hold water either. There was a Spanish attempt to invade England, but that was in 1588 when Philip II’s Spanish Armada tried to

take England as part of the Anglo-Spanish War and was routed. On their return to Spain, two dozen Spanish ships were wrecked on the rocks off the west coast of Ireland. There were further Armadas, which were no more successful, and perhaps the most significant one here is when Philip III of Spain sent a number of ships to aid Irish rebels in 1601, leading to the Battle of Kinsale, where the English troops once again defeated the Spanish, along with their Irish allies.

“. . . colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants.” As we’re now firmly into the middle of the second millennium, rather than the first one, we need to revisit our definition of Christianity. A major split occurred in Western Christianity in 1517 when Martin Luther published his *Ninety-five Theses* as a reaction to abuses in the Catholic Church. This led to the formation of a number of branches of Christianity loosely grouped together as Protestant churches. Of primary interest here is Anglicanism, the state religion of England (which was by now definitely a thing), brought into being following the English Reformation, whose prime motivator was King Henry VIII’s desire to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and to marry Anne Boleyn, because he had the raging hots for her, and she refused to be his mistress, so the only way he could have his way with her was to actually marry her, an event that led Irish writer Brendan Behan to write:

Don't speak of your Protestant minister,  
Nor of his church without meaning or faith,  
For the foundation stone of his temple  
Was the bollocks of Henry VIII

Subsequently, and to this day, whilst Ireland remains a majority Roman Catholic country, England, and indeed the rest of the United Kingdom, is a majority Protestant country. This was to have a long and still ongoing effect on Ireland.

To go back to “. . . colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants,” I want to particularly examine the term Northern Ireland. Ireland is historically divided into four provinces, Munster, Leinster, Connaught, and Ulster, with Ulster being the northernmost. Because resistance to British rule was strongest in Ulster, the British



crown forces began to colonize it from 1606 onwards with people from Great Britain, mostly from Scotland and northern England, who were English-speaking, Protestant, and loyal to the crown. This is commonly known as the Plantation of Ulster. Now, the province of Ulster is traditionally composed of nine counties, Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Monaghan, and Tyrone. Although Ulster is in the north of Ireland, it does not follow that it is the same as Northern Ireland. Since 1921 the island of Ireland has been divided into two separate countries: the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is in turn one of the component parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Further, when Northern Ireland was created it was composed of only six of the counties in Ulster – which is why it is sometimes referred to as the Six Counties. So it is, strictly speaking, inexact to refer to Northern Ireland being colonized by Protestants, as the colonization started in 1606, three hundred and fifteen years before Northern Ireland came into existence. People often use “Ulster” to refer to Northern Ireland, but we need to be exact here: not only is ‘Northern Ireland’ not used as a synonym for the province of Ulster but it wasn’t used to refer to *anything* until just over a hundred years ago!

I just want to mention that in this sentence: *“So England was afraid that Spain would use Ireland as a base for an invasion, colonizing Northern Ireland with Protestants,”* it is not immediately evident who the speaker is saying was colonizing Northern Ireland, although we know who it was because we know the history, but if you did not, you could just as easily surmise that it was Spain who wanted to do so.

And it should be a reasonably quick run to the finish from here! We are left with this: *“Ever since the Republic of Ireland has tried to unify the country by taking over Northern Ireland—which resists and is backed by England, protecting its interests there.”*

Let me start with *“Ever since.”* Ever since when, exactly? Although the first part of Joy’s statement is only thirty-seven words long, it theoretically covers a period of fifteen hundred years, from when Christianity first reached Ireland up to the present day. Not only that, but it also jumps around in time, presenting events several hundred years apart as if they happen virtually simultaneously, and even –

sort of – presents them out of chronological order. And virtually every word of it needs to be taken separately, and properly unpacked, to correctly identify what meaning there may be hidden within it. If we want to be kind, we could suppose that she means ever since the Plantation of Ulster, although this is difficult to align with what comes next . . .

*“The Republic of Ireland”* has, like Northern Ireland, only been in existence as a political entity since 1921. Further, it could only, logically, have *“tried to unify the country”* if the country was divided, i.e., from 1921. In fact, although Article 2 of the Irish Constitution did at one stage read *“The national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas,”* this was amended by referendum in 1998 to read, *“It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation.”* In fact, the Republic of Ireland has never attempted to ‘take over’ Northern Ireland, although this is still held as an aspiration of the state. It was actually, post-1921, various Irish Republican paramilitary organizations, most notably the Irish Republican Army, or IRA, who were fighting to bring about Irish unity. Obviously enough, Irish unity can only have been an issue since 1921, but this was by no means where Irish paramilitary tactics being used to rid the country of the forces of the British Crown began. Fortunately, I’m not going to need to delve into those. Most recently, the *“Troubles”* in Northern Ireland, beginning in 1969, caused a lot of the kind of violent action and random bombings both in the province and on the British mainland, such as the bombing that opens this particular story, leading to Joy Mercado’s completely misleading and garbled mashup of various events in Irish history.

Anyway, that’s pretty much as good a close analysis of this as I could do, without writing several thousand more words about it all. The most maddening thing about it is that there are grains of truth throughout it all, but that the totality of it is howlingly wrong. And not only wrong but dangerous. How many people read this at an impressionable age, and presumed it was the truth? After all, Marvel wouldn’t lie to them, right? And to be more serious, Joy Mercado was meant to be a journalist, so would be expected to have established the facts for herself. Instead, what we have here is the kind of thing that we’d expect nowadays

from an online conspiracy theorist, taking random bits of fact and gluing them together without regard for context or timescale. But to be fair to the (admittedly fictitious) Ms. Mercado, the fault here lies with the actual writer who put the words in her mouth.

(And to be honest, I'm amazed that Marvel editorial staff let this one through – surely someone there must have had a better idea of the actual facts or could have verified them in their local library, or however they did their fact-checking back in those dark, pre-Internet days?)

*Now, James, is that the kind of thing you were after? ©*



# **Getting to Know the Friendly Neighborhood Wallcrawler: Three Books About Spider-Man by Chuck Surface**

Everything is right with escapism. I know because I read comics. Instances from favorite stories took me away from terrible days at work or school. I was there for it when Galactus throttled the High Evolutionary, or even more spectacularly, the Sphinx. When Captain America defied the Superhuman Registration Act and went underground – imagine being the Sentinel of Liberty and possessing that steady moral core. Finally, when at the end of *Kingdom Come* #1 Superman returns from his lengthy mourning to handle out-of-control super-beings I felt open wonder thanks to Mark Waid and Alex Ross. There are so many I could recount.

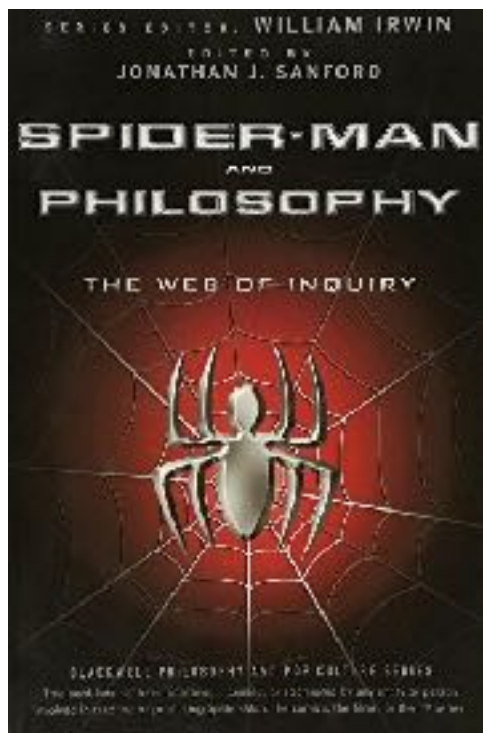
Brave souls, however, have been moving beyond escapism and asking deep questions about comics. Studies abound regarding the history of creators, characters, and the industry in general. Critics are asking questions about how comics speak to society, and how society communicates back to comics. Philosophy, theology, sociology, and psychology have all become lenses for analyzing graphic novels, and comic studies as a field keeps expanding at a rate impossible to pace. For examples of what I mean, check out my observations about studies related to Superman here: <https://chucksurface.com/2016/02/21/getting-to-know-the-man-of-steel-five-biographies-of-superman/>. I treat Batman similarly here: <https://chucksurface.com/2016/12/17/five-moments-that-define-my-batman/>. I review books about Wonder Woman here: <https://chucksurface.com/2016/02/21/getting-to-know-the-princess-of-power-four-biographies-of-wonder-woman/>. Then I briefly examine Captain America scholarship here: <https://chucksurface.com/2016/02/21/getting-to-know-the-sentinel-of-liberty-two-books->



[about-captain-america/](#). And I look at a Lois Lane biography here: <https://chucksurface.com/2017/07/26/investigating-lois-lane-the-turbulent-history-of-the-daily-planets-ace-reporter-by-tim-hanley/>.

Mind you, I'm not nearly as academically erudite, and that's especially true when speaking about those who have turned their energies toward Spider-Man. I'm reviewing three books, collections of essays that examine our favorite wallcrawler philosophically, psychologically, and theologically. With each, I'll focus on articles that struck me deeply, that drove me to read more expansively about the topics presented because other than providing entertainment that's what good reading does – it inspires you to read more, to feed the old noggin. Let's belly up to the table, shall we?

### **Spider-Man and Philosophy: The Web of Inquiry by Jonathan J. Sanford (Editor) and William Irwin (Series Editor)**



*Spider-Man and Philosophy* is part of the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series. To my awareness, there are two such series, this one and Carus Book's Popular Culture and Philosophy under its Open Court imprint, which has become Pop Culture and Philosophy under its Open Universe imprint. Blackwell and Carus follow the same goal: to present weighty subjects to general readers through attractive popular media. Mary Poppins was right. A spoonful of sugar does help the medicine go down. To date, there are volumes dedicated to *Seinfeld*, *The Good Place*, Neil Gaiman, David Bowie, *The Godfather*, and of course, superheroes both generally and specifically.

With Spider-Man, questions revolve around the meaning of responsibility, since Uncle Ben taught us, "With great power comes great responsibility." Unsurprisingly, deontology enters the picture along with moral imperatives and other ethical considerations. Also included are explications of humor – since Spidey is the quip master – and narratology. Overall, it's not a bad batch. A

typo in the first article had me wondering who J. Jonas is, but, yes, it's J. Jonah Jameson and not some forgotten Jonas brother.

What caught my attention is the section "Arachnids 'R' Us: Arachnids and the Human, All Too Human" which contains chapters on transhumanism and cloning. Jason Southworth and John Timm splendidly point out flaws within The Clone Saga while educating dunces like me about the truth surrounding cloning. Much hand-waving occurs there, but what would comic books be without a bit of manually generated wind?

Ron Novy's "Transhumanism: Or Is It Right to Make a Spider-Man" started my cerebral wheels spinning, however. Oxford tells us transhumanism means, "the belief or theory that the human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology." Whether by accident or design, most superheroes are examples of transhumanist possibility. Steve Rogers transformed into Captain America through some fancy laboratory manipulation. Tony Stark not only employs technology to augment himself with his Iron Man armor but at one juncture modifies his body with extremis technology to enhance his techno-abilities. And Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive (or genetically altered) spider and thus gained all those wallcrawling skills that make him the envy of Queens. Transhumanism - all of it.

Novy illustrates how he views transhumanism using Aunt May:

Aunt May is a cyborg. Her visual acuity far exceeds that of any member of her bridge club. Her access to stored information is incalculably greater than that of her ancestors. Her body's metabolism is alterable more or less at will. All of this fantastical manipulation of her otherwise normal human body - yet it's just another Sunday morning for Aunt May, sipping coffee and peering through her bifocals at the *Daily Bugle*. (145)

Wow. Following this reasoning, I too am a cyborg since I wear bifocals. I don't drink coffee or tea, but friends joke about that "first cup" and the perks of caffeinated stimulation. We're all more apt to digest our news through the Internet now, not an old-fashioned print edition like the one Aunt May enjoys. Hip replacement? Transhumanism. Metal pins in your ankle? Transhumanism. My daily hypertension meds and vitamins? Congratulations, Chuck! Colonel Steve Austin would be proud. Obviously, Novy proposes a wide definition of transhumanism, but even I know enough about it to realize the controversies involved. What are the limits our species is willing to accept with this topic?

Novy the transhumanist spends pages refuting Francis Fukuyama, who in his "The World's Most Dangerous Idea: Transhumanism" (2004) criticizes the concept heavily. I'm no fan of Francis Fukuyama regardless of any stance he takes on any subject, but that's neither here nor there. Before confronting Fukuyama, Novy outlines basic criticisms of transhumanism:

Among the many criticisms of deliberate enhancement beyond the mere human range, three related themes stand out: that enhancement requires one to play God with the natural order; that it will destroy the equality of persons that underpins liberal democracy; and that it deprives the enhanced being of his or her pure human essence. (146-147)

When disputing Fukuyama, he states:

So, in response to Fukuyama calling transhumanism a "strange liberation movement," we might say, "Yes, it is, and a good thing too." The ongoing effort to free ourselves from the biological inheritance of our ancestors is a defining characteristic of human history – from the first pointy stick to the latest antibiotics. According to Fukuyama, the effort to wrestle "biological from evolution's blind process of random variation and adaptation and move to the next stage as a species is to be feared and avoided." On the contrary, given the trajectory of human technology and medicine, it not only seems inevitable that we will continue to push against whatever limits our abilities, thoughts, emotions, and duration exist, but we actually have a responsibility to do so. We may never be quite like a "god among men" as Glaucon expressed it, but nonetheless, humans have continually met and broadened those limits to good effect. (151-152)

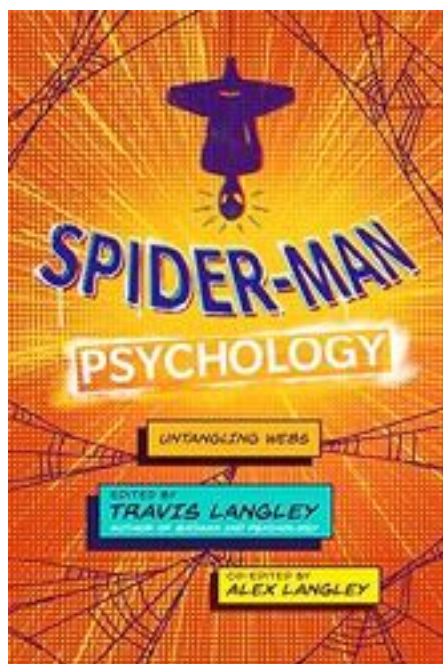
The word avoided here is *ableism*. Transhumanism whether you support it, is inherently ableist. Novy and Fukuyama, at least presented through Novy, leave this out of the equation. Novy's right. Science and technology will continue advancing human survival. While living in Ukraine, I was discussing my cancer history with a doctor who informed me that if I'd developed cancer there and not in the United States, I'd be dead. Yes, but this speaks to survival. I survived. Others might make choices when facing chronic pain or to enhance their quality of life, not to be the next Hugo Danner (eugenics – egad). In a paper appearing in *The Varsity* entitled "Can We Evolve on Our Own Terms?," Whitney Buluma says it much better than I can:

It can be argued that transhumanism is simply arguing for a more extensive use of such assistive devices. However, the rhetoric of transhumanists is implicitly an ableist one. It assumes that people with disabilities are in need of “fixing,” and that their lives would be improved by giving them the same abilities as abled people.

Properly working elevators and accessible buildings are far more within our reach than bionic implants for improving the quality of life – environmental changes are viable. I’m not poo-pooing my bifocals or anyone else’s hip replacements, but ramps, please. Besides, I choose bifocals over Lasik surgery. They work for me.

*Spider-Man and Philosophy* passed my inspired-to-read-more test. I surely have more to read on ableism and probably said something above that’s not quite accurate. I’m more waking up than woke, I’m afraid. Hopefully, something inside this volume likewise will inspire you.

### **Spider-Man Psychology: Untangling Webs by Travis Langley (Editor) and Alex Langley (Co-Editor)**



Travis Langley’s made quite an industry by applying psychological concepts to comics and other pop-culture phenomena. A Professor of Psychology at Henderson State University who once investigated child-abuses cases and boasts of a Wheel of Fortune championship, he’s edited collections analyzing Batman (now in its second edition), Wonder Woman, Daredevil, the Black Panther, Captain America and Iron Man, the Joker, *Star Wars*, *The Walking Dead*, *Stranger Things*, *Doctor Who*, and *Supernatural*. Now we have *Spider-Man Psychology*. The self-identified “superherologist” has covered it all.



We receive a wider consideration of the Spider-Verse, particularly Miles Morales, but Miles had been around maybe a year when *Spider-Man and Philosophy* was published. Spider-Woman, Ghost-Spider, and others garner no notice. Perhaps sequels entitled *The Spider-Verse and Philosophy* and *Spider-Verse Psychology* will appear someday? There was enough with Langley and Company to spur inner dialogues, nonetheless.

Joe Deckelmeier from *Screen Rant* talked with Langley, and the psychologist revealed why he thought Spider-Man has kept his popularity through the decades:

It is his humanity that makes him popular, what makes him endure. That neurotic quality appeals to us because, to one degree or another, we've all got something neurotic in us, which means it's normal to have something neurotic in you, to a degree. It's a lot of work and a lot of fun going in all these. This one, I loved working on it so much that if I never did another one, I said I felt like it would be complete to me.

This rings true not only for Peter Parker but for Miles Morales as well. Miles originated in Marvel's Ultimate Universe, but his popularity inspired creators to continue with him when that venture eventually waned. But their "neuroses" are different, and so fans relate to them for different reasons. Richard-Michael Calzada and Vanessa Hintz explain how this plays out in their "From a Leap to a Spark: Mile Morales and the Coming-of-Age Experience for Latinx and Black Heroes," where they define social ecological theory as being raised in a "complex system involving family values, cultural norms, laws, and superhero ideologies. (52)" Peter too came of age in a complex environment, but he's White, not biracial Black and Latinx like Miles. The authors explicate why this variance matters:

Young Latinx males often undergo institutional violence and mistreatment from authority figures, such as teachers, school resource officers, and rival members of different peer groups, including gangs. Thus, Miles stays aware of how people perceive him. As the son of a police officer and a nurse, he shows standards of model teen behavior higher than those of the average student. His vigilance is a way of not only keeping himself accountable but also surviving a harsh world. (52)

Other than the villains his Spidey persona confronts, Peter deals with Flash Thompson and J. Jonah Jameson, but his teachers love him, gangs don't enter his world, but not so with Miles. What's important for Miles is "critical mentoring," a mentor relationship that is culturally aware, and that understands Latinx and Black experiences.

Essentially, Miles himself mentors young fans of color. For decades, my generation and those that followed benefited from Peter's existential adventures, but the Spider-Verse has enhanced these chances for many.

In "Finding Your Inner Superhero: Adolescent Moral Identity Development," Apryl Alexander offers her views about this topic, identifying how Miles seeks individuation, a sense of his own self:

In fandom, some debate surrounds the notion of racebending characters (i.e., taking established characters and changing their race). When the mask Miles wears gets damaged and partially exposes his face, a reporter notes his apparent race, which is not how Miles wants to be defined. In essence, he wants to be known for his actions and commitments to community rather than his racial/ethnic identity . . . Miles just wants to be Spider-Man. (66)

Alexander is mindful of colorblindness, however, and cites W. E. B. DuBois and his "double-consciousness," how Black people "often balance integrating their sense of self and Black identity with the need to placate to whiteness and the White gaze. (66)" She advocates for Miles's heritage just as strongly as Calzada and Hintz.

I quote heavily above to give you an image of how *Spider-Man Psychology* operates. Psychological professionals outline terms, bring issues, and apply them to all things Spider-Man. Mentorship and coming-of-age are only two pieces from an extra-large combination pizza. Contributors provide insights covering relationships, post-traumatic stress, and even Jungian analysis. Key terms are italicized, and relevance permeates the text. Anything by Langley is worth the price of admission. My reading lists experience substantial growth each time I encounter his collections.

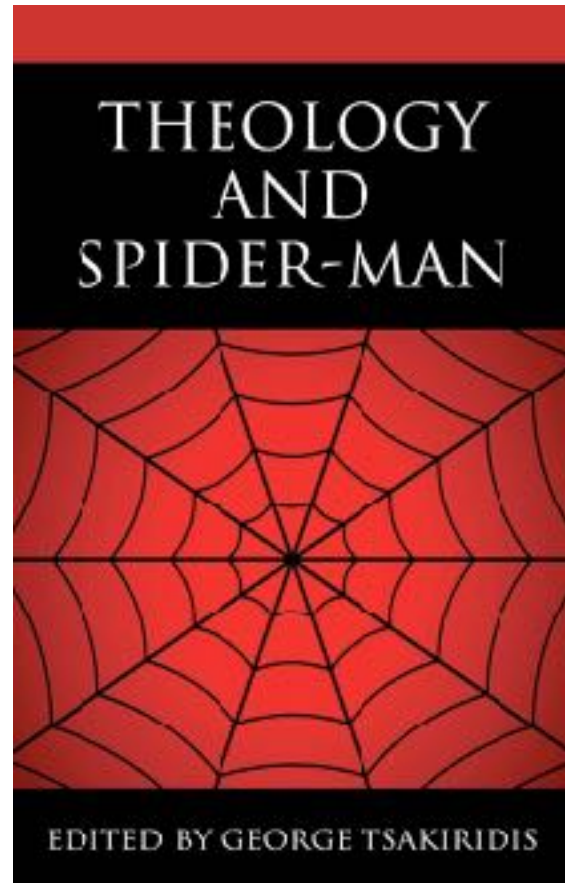
## Theology and Spider-Man by George Tsakiridis (Editor)

Senior Lecturer of Religion and Philosophy at South Dakota State University George Tsakiridis has gathered several theologians who've directed their analytical skills to Spider-Man. Upon discovering this book existed, I wasn't sure how I felt about *Theology and Spider-Man*, since I'm not a churchgoer. Theology for me stands apart from religious studies or comparative religion, the latter two being more palatable to my reading tastes. Would these authors use Spider-man as a symbol for born-again Christianity, that Evangelical sort who have wedded themselves with the rampaging totalitarian Republican party? Thankfully, no. I found *Theology and Spider-Man* the best out of the three volumes I'm presenting, even if the cover

price for this academic offering stands at a staggering \$111.00 full price for hardcover and \$45.00 for Kindle! My employee retention bonus from the County of Santa Clara helped ease the strain, most assuredly.

During an interview with *Populartheologyandculture.com*, Tsakiridis reveals why he pairs Spider-Man and theology:

The core of intellectual curiosity into Spider-Man is fairly evident. He is a deeply moral figure who has suffered loss. He lives by the somewhat biblical phrase, "with great power comes great responsibility." Spidey also raises a lot of curiosity in his scientific and genetic makeup. He is transformed into a being with two natures, both spider and man, and his title "Spider-Man" is reminiscent of the early Christian creeds describing the "God-man." His very nature also raises bioethical questions, as do his



foes. Many of them arise out of the misappropriation of scientific knowledge, Lizard and Dr. Octopus foremost among them.

And he describes what's between the covers:

In this volume, the essays start with the foundational questions of sin and salvation, but move into broader theological discussion of creedal belief, bioethics, and iconography. Engagement with Black Theology and Liberation Theology are explored. The volume presents a kind of constructive or quasi-systematic theology of Spider-Man. But it just starts the conversation. Given the diversity of sources: films, comic books, toys, video games, etc., all of which are explored in the volume, one cannot create something comprehensive in 250 pages. What a volume like this can do is create inquiry, wonder, and narrative for your own engagement with Spider-Man. I encourage you to read this volume with an eye to fun and creativity, undergirded by moral and theological depth, and I think you'll find joy in the journey. Of course, as the editor I'm fairly biased.

Theology and Spider-Man upped my additional reading game, especially concerning liberation theology, a concept I'd encountered before through Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian philosopher and Dominican priest. Centered in Latin America, liberation theology rose first during the twentieth century and practitioners direct energies toward the poor and oppressed among us. Marxist thought enters the mix, blending with Catholic practice, highlighting a reconstruction that drives focus toward relations between oppressors and the oppressed. These precepts have been applied to other marginalized sectors, including women and LGBTIA+, by Marcella Althaus-Reid and others, and race by a name that bursts with importance within one article that caught my attention – James Cone.

Matthew Vega and Russell P. Johnson direct James Cone's thoughts at Miles Morales. They examine Peter Parker's identity growth throughout the Sam Raimi films and also Miles's throughout *Into the Spider-Verse*. Miles undergoes a different journey than Peter's of course:

In the first act, Miles is caught between two realms: one in which he belongs, and one which is alienating. These two worlds are racially coded. As he walks past his old exchange trash talk, and he does a special

handshake with a friend. The scene outside Brooklyn Middle School is in stark contrast to Miles's new private school, Visions Academy. In this school – racially diverse, but primarily white – Miles's jokes fall flat, and he has trouble making friends. One student says, "Your shoes are untied," and doesn't stick around to hear Miles, exasperatedly, explain that this is intentional. (136)

Miles strives to blend these two worlds in much the way James Cone, a Black theologian active beginning in the 1960s, blended theology and Black Power, moving away from his former stance where he kept silent about Black Power issues because he wanted to show White people that "he was a good Christian Negro with good manners." (140) Both Miles and Cone eventually remove masks that don't fit them, choosing instead raiment or attitudes that serve and enhance their authenticity. Although he's not the only Spider-Man, he becomes his own Spider-Man whereas Cone becomes his own authentic theologian serving an oppressed population. I very much want to read James Cone now.

Another article treats liberation theology with a stunning example Josh McDonald gives us "Venom, the Liberation Theologian." Yes, that Venom. When first seeing that title, I thought, "Oh, I've got to see this." How could a villain even symbolically represent philosophies with goals of reformation, reconstruction, and renewal? After reading McDonald, I exclaimed, "Yes, that works!" I was only vaguely aware that Venom had shifted from villain to antihero. I must catch up, it seems.

McDonald posits that liberation theologians mind not only the materially poor but also innocents. Venom apparently protects the poor and the innocent, and McDonald tells us more about that:

Venom knows that "to be oppressed is to be against the oppressor . . . to run personal risks – even to put one's life in danger. Compare Venom's approach to the poor and needy with Spider-Man's. Venom is very careful to put the homeless and downtrodden at ease. He hides his Symbiote and even undertakes the effort to make his living costume blend in with that community. He apologizes for exposing them to the bloodiness of his justice. He passionately defends them and works to cleanse their neighborhoods. On the other hand, when confronted with the struggles of real people living in bad neighborhoods, Spider-Man takes them to the top of the city to admire the lights and to inspire them with tales of the city's



potential. Both are cases of pastoral care, of course, but Spidey's seems effete in comparison. (181)

Mind-blowing, right? So, why does liberation theology grab my attention rather than other interesting titles – “Tyger, Lamb, Spider, Hunter: *Kraven’s Last Hunt* and the Web of Theodicy,” or “Untangling the Web of Sins: the Superior Spider-Man as Secular Hagiography,” or “Spider-Man: An Icon in Your Pocket,” for example? Liberation theology speaks not only to Catholics but to Protestants. Much Christian practice has drifted too far from where liberation theology hopes to return it. I’ll never be a church-goer, but I’ll feel relieved when far-right, demagogic hate centers many call “churches” move into the minority behind those centers I know are practicing truly good works among oppressed individuals. Liberation theology shows us how maybe even partly because of the Marxist theories considered.

I hope you take away much from these books. Obviously, I have. I’m looking now toward the stack delivered just this afternoon, most of which came because I read these three books. These books made me care enough to explore more. What more of an endorsement could anyone want?



# An Interview with David Hine by James Bacon



*Spider-Man Noir was part of a noir series of interpretations of characters released as a four-parter in 2009, it's a terrific piece of work. David Hine conjured up a beautiful vision of a Spider-Man who was so very different in approach and much more realistic, while the story was very in tune with politics and is a fan favorite, especially amongst readers who enjoy finding details and considering what the story is saying. He's a comic reader's writer, thoughtful yet delightfully clever and Spider-Man Noir is superb and well worth reading.*

*David had mentioned to me that, "Spider-Man Noir was a very satisfactory book to work on overall, and Marvel did let us get away with quite a lot without too much interference." Yet the huge machine that is Marvel is clearly seen here, as David gives us honest and insightful answers.*



**David, with Spider-Man Noir, can you tell us how you were asked, and what you were asked to do?**

I think the first issue of *Spider-Man Noir* came out December 17th, 2008, but I have emails going back to early 2007 when Fabrice Sapolsky and I were discussing the plot with editor Warren Simons, and we first came up with the concept in 2006. In fact, we were never actually asked to do it! This was the only time I tried pitching something blind to Marvel. What happened was that I met up with Fabrice Sapolsky when he was publishing a magazine in France called *Comic Box*. He had interviewed me a couple of times about the comics I had written for Marvel, and we knew one another quite well by this time. We met in a café in London's unofficial French Quarter of South Kensington. He was very enthusiastic about the idea of creating a 1930s pulp version of Spider-Man. I emphasize "pulp" rather than "noir" because that was how we saw the character at this point.

Fabrice likes to remind me that I rubbished the idea at that meeting. Let's say I was skeptical. However, I went home and had a think about it and the idea began to take hold. In fact, we both became so enthusiastic that we ended up pitching a whole line of Marvel pulp comics. *Pulp Spider-Man* would be based on 1930s mystery and crime pulps, with elements of the supernatural. Then we had *Pulp X-Men* in a carny freakshow setting, similar to Todd Browning's *Freaks* movie, *Pulp Iron Man* would be a cold-war science-fiction story, and so on. Joe Quesada, who was editor-in-chief at Marvel at that time, responded well but it took ages for

us to get a contract signed. At some point, we found out that there was an editorial focus on doing a series of comics with a film noir style and it looked like we might be edged out completely. In other words, there would be several different comic series featuring Marvel characters in the 1930s, but we might not be working on any of them! I don't pretend to understand the office politics at Marvel, but we had more or less given up hope until I spoke again to Joe sometime in early 2007 and he pushed to get us a series. We were kind of adjacent to the other noir books like *Daredevil Noir*, *X-Men Noir*, *Punisher Noir*, and *Iron Man Noir*. We worked first with Warren Simons, then he stepped back, and Alejandro Arbonara became our editor with Nick Lowe as assistant editor. Everything gelled at that point and the book began to take shape.

In spite of the fact that there seemed to be a lot of opposition to our approach to the book, *Spider-Man Noir* is the character out of all the noir line that proved most popular and has stood the test of time.

**Can you give us some insight into any inspiration for the character, or what you wanted to present with this version of Spider-Man?**

Our Peter Parker was very much the personality that Steve Ditko and Stan Lee created but we gave him a more realistic edge. Being a teenager in early 1930s New York gave us the chance to write a highly political story. This was a period where it looked like socialism might become the most powerful force in American politics. It seemed perfectly natural for Aunt May and Uncle Ben to be communist agitators, standing up for workers' rights, campaigning for the out-of-work homeless, and working in soup kitchens.

I know some readers thought this was inappropriate for the characters but that's really down to their own political persuasion. For me, the Parkers were always about equality, justice, and standing up for the underdog. In the time of the Great Depression, it seems to me inconceivable that they would be anything but pro-socialist and opposed to the rampant capitalism of both the Democratic and Republican parties. But I guess that's a reflection of my own politics.

Fabrice was very keen to be faithful to the spirit of the original Spider-Man character created by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, so we were always going back to those comics from the early sixties to draw on the characters of J Jonah Jameson and all the villains, like the Goblin and Sandman. They all fit very well with the stories. I never saw JJJ as a really villainous person. If he had been, Peter Parker would have taken his photographs elsewhere. I think Jameson disliked the idea of a vigilante running around New York acting outside of the law, and he had a

point. So, we made him a righteous, campaigning editor, though there are a number of twists in the plot where it looked like he might be working with the Goblin and his crew.

**Politics a always present in your stories. What message were you hoping readers would pick up on and how did you go about getting this into the story?**

I really wanted our American readers to go back to their history books and fact-check the things we were saying about the exploitation of the workers, racism, and corruption in high places. All the detail was very authentic: the speakeasies and nightclubs, the overcrowding of slum tenements that were often burned down by landlords to claim on the insurance, and the shanty towns in New York where the unemployed were living. (There was one small error there. I did send lots of reference pictures with the scripts, but I think some of them were lost in transit because the huts in the shanty town were positively luxurious compared to the real thing. In the comic they have electricity!)

We had a scene in the first issue where Peter Parker goes to the Black Cat nightclub with reporter Ben Urich. Urich points out to Peter all the corrupt officials who were hanging out there, all based on real people. The mayor, Jimmy Stryder, for instance, was based on corrupt New York mayor Jimmy Walker.

In a later story, we even had Mary Jane going to fight against Franco in Spain in the Abraham Lincoln International Brigade, which actually was the brigade for anti-fascist volunteers from the USA. I don't know how much of the politics the readers picked up on, but I always did masses of research to make everything as accurate to the real world as possible. Except for the time travel and alternate dimensions of course . . .

**You wrote a second arc, Spider-Man Noir: Eyes Without a Face, was it that the character was popular and what did you plan to do with this story?**

We ended series one with some foreboding headlines from the newspapers about the Nazis rising to power in Germany. We wanted to up the ante for the second series. The USA sees itself as the savior of Europe during the Second World War, but they took their time getting involved and in the early years there were a lot of Nazis in the USA. There is shocking footage online of the Nazi Rally of 1939 in Madison Square Garden. We wanted to introduce the journalist Robbie Robertson, who is a character from the 1960s Spider-man comic, but it wouldn't



have been realistic to have him work at the Daily Bugle. There simply weren't any black journalists working on white-owned newspapers. There were plenty of Black newspapers though, so I had him work for *Negro World*, which was a real, Black-run newspaper.

Black people tended to vote Republican back then. The Democratic party was the party of the Deep South and former slave owners. The detail I dropped in about Roosevelt refusing to back an anti-lynching bill because he didn't want to lose the Southern vote is accurate, as are Robbie's comments about the National Recovery Act. That line of his about N.R.A. meaning "Negroes Robbed Again" was lifted direct from a contemporary Black newspaper. Then there is stuff about the Friends of New Germany, the experiments of Dr. Octavius reflect the Tuskegee experiments that were begun at about the same time, which allowed Black men with syphilis to go untreated in order to study the effects of the disease. Those experiments only ended in 1972 and were a huge scandal in America.

So yeah, I guess my message to the readers was that America has never been a country of liberty and equality for all. I was quite proud of the fact that *Spider-Man Noir* ended up on a list of "Un-American Books" on Amazon at one point.

**In 2010 the video game *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* brought together Spider-Man, Ultimate Spider-Man, Spider-Man Noir, and Spider-Man 2099, and from this came the concept of the Spider-Verse. What did you make of this?**

I suppose it was fun for the fans to have a video game based on those characters. I didn't take too much notice of it, never owned a copy, and never played it. The Spider-Verse is a great fantasy concept and I love both movies but emphatically not what was done with the character. It simply is not the Spider-Man Noir that Fabrice and I created.



**In 2014 you wrote Edge of Spider-Verse #1 as the concept of a Spider-Verse seemed to coalesce and come together, and Noir entered into a multi-verse story with the likes of Spider-Gwen. What involvement did you have with the broader story? How did your story fit in and how did this go do you think?**

Fabrice and I had no input into the Spider-Verse as a whole. Nick Lowe was the editor of our book, and he made sure we were invited to write issue one of the series. We didn't know much about where the concept was headed but we were given a very open brief, so I thought setting it once again in a real-world venue would be a good idea. This time it was the New York World's Fair of 1939. Salvador Dali really did have a surrealist show there called *The Dream of Venus* with topless women and lobsters. Unfortunately, Aunt May disapproved, so Peter Parker didn't get to see it. In the words of Aunt May: "Mr. Dali may put a lobster on a naked woman's head and call it art, but he doesn't fool me. The man is running a burlesque show."

We had fun with the story and it's pretty close to the kind of thing Lee and Ditko would do in single-issue Spider-Man stories in the sixties. I only have the vaguest idea of what happened to the characters in the subsequent Spider-Verse stories. I know they gave him a hat (which he only wore on the street as a disguise in our comics) and had him use his guns a lot.

**The Character has been animated, and in the film Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse, voiced by Nicolas Cage. There is talk of a Spider-Man Noir Amazon TV series, do you follow all the changes, and will you be watching the TV series?**

Nicolas Cage did a great job on the tongue-in-cheek version that inhabits the Spider-Verse but, once again, this is not the character we created. If the TV series happens, I'll watch it, but I expect to be cringing through it. It is what it is. You work for Marvel, and they own everything you create and can do what they want with it. I'm just happy that Fabrice and I got to put two pretty good series out there and worked with artists of the caliber of Carmine Di Giandomenico and Richard Isanove.

**END**

I met David at NICE Comic Con in Bedford and as ever the discussion went across a variety of aspects, from the Tiananmen Square issue of *Crisis* to fan writing, and he was charming and very engaging. He has an appreciation of fanzines and understands how fans weave strands drawing professionals and hobbyists together in a shared passion.

David understood that many of our readers might not be au fait with this work, and I was keen to steer you towards its brilliance, and he gave us very fulsome answers, for which I am very grateful.

We hope and look forward to hearing what you think about *Spider-Man Noir* and welcome comments to [journeyplanet@gmail.com](mailto:journeyplanet@gmail.com)

