

ALL OF THE MARVELS



ALSO BY DOUGLAS WOLK

James Brown's Live at the Apollo

*Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work
and What They Mean*



ALL OF THE MARVELS

**An Amazing Voyage into
Marvel's Universe and
27,000 Superhero Comics**

DOUGLAS WOLK

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For Sterling, who read with me



Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.

—MARK STRAND, “EATING POETRY”

The story of Doom can *end*, you say? ... Then I'm a
better story than *you*.

—DOCTOR DOOM, TO LOKI, IN *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #6

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1

THE MOUNTAIN OF MARVELS

The twenty-seven thousand or so superhero comic books that Marvel Comics has published since 1961 are the longest continuous, self-contained work of fiction ever created: over half a million pages to date, and growing. Thousands of writers and artists have contributed to it. Every week, about twenty slim pamphlets of twenty or thirty pages apiece are added to the body of its single enormous story. By design, any of its episodes can build on the events of any that came before it, and they're all (more or less) consistent with one another.

Every schoolchild recognizes the Marvel story's protagonists: Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men. Eighteen of the hundred highest-grossing movies of all time, from *Avengers: Endgame* and *Black Panther* down to *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, are based on parts of the story, and it has profoundly influenced a lot of the rest: *Star Wars* and *Avatar* and *The Matrix* would be unimaginable without it.

Its characters and the images associated with them appear on T-shirts, travel pillows, dog leashes, pizza cutters, shampoo bottles, fishing gear, jigsaw puzzles, and bags of salad greens. (Some of the people who love the story also love to be reminded of it, or to associate themselves with particular characters from it.) Its catchphrases have seeped into standard usage: “Spidey-sense,” “you wouldn’t like me when I’m angry,” “I say thee nay,” “healing factor,” “no—*you* move,” “bitten by a radioactive spider,” “puny humans,” “threat or menace?,” “true believers,” “nuff said.” Parts of it have been adapted into serial TV dramas, animated cartoons, prose novels, picture books, video games, theme-park attractions, and a Broadway musical. For someone who lives in our society, having some familiarity with the Marvel story is useful in much the same way as, say, being familiar with the Bible is useful for someone who lives in a Judeo-Christian society: its iconography and influence are pervasive.

The Marvel story is a mountain, smack in the middle of contemporary culture. The mountain wasn’t always there. At first, there was a little subterranean wonder in that spot, a cave that was rumored to have monsters inside it; colorful adventurers had once tested their skills there, and lovers met at its mouth. Then, in the 1960s, it started bulging up above the surface of the earth, and it never stopped growing.

It’s not the kind of mountain whose face you can climb. It doesn’t seem hazardous (and it isn’t), but those who try to follow what appear to be direct trails to its summit find that it’s grown higher every time they look up. The way to experience what the mountain has to offer is to go *inside* it and explore its innumerable bioluminescent caverns and twisty passageways; some of them lead to stunning vantage points onto the landscape that surrounds it.

There is no clear pathway into the mountain from the outside. Parts of it are abandoned and choked with cobwebs. Other parts are tedious, gruesome, ludicrous, infuriating. And yet people emerge from it all the time, gasping and cheering, telling one another about the marvels they’ve seen, then rushing back in for more.



Marvel Comics, as an artistic and commercial project, began in the early 1960s, initially as the work of a handful of experienced comics professionals—artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, editor/writer Stan Lee,* and a few others. The superhero stories that had dominated American comic books in the late '30s and early '40s had mostly fallen out of style at that point, but instead of returning to that faltering genre as it had been, Kirby, Ditko, and Lee combined it with aspects of the genres that had supplanted it: the uncanny horror of the monster and sci-fi stories Ditko and Kirby had been drawing more recently; the focus on the emotion of the romance anthologies Kirby had helped to invent in 1947; the gently jabbing wit of the humor titles Lee had been writing for many years. That hybrid formula—absorbing monster comics and romance comics and humor comics *into* superhero comics—turned out to be irresistible and durable. Marvel's early stories responded to the atmosphere of their historical moment, sometimes explicitly in their content and always implicitly in their themes.

Then Kirby, Lee, Ditko, and their collaborators figured out how to make the individual narrative melodies of all of their comics harmonize with one another, turning each episode into a component of a gigantic epic. That led to a vastly broader artistic collaboration: ever since then, its writers and artists have been elaborating on one another's visions, sometimes set in the same place and time but often separated by generations and continents.

The big Marvel story is a funhouse-mirror history of the past sixty years of American life, from the atomic night-terrors of the Cold War to the technocracy and pluralism of the present day—a boisterous, tragicomic, magnificently filigreed story about power and ethics, set in a world transformed by wonders. In some of its deeper caverns, it's the most for-

*For the prehistory of Marvel, see chapter 5; for more on these three, see chapter 7.

bidding, baffling, overwhelming work of art in existence. At its fringes, it's so easy to understand and enjoy that you can read a five-year-old an issue of *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* and she'll get it right away. And not even the people telling the story have read the whole thing.

That's fine. Nobody is *supposed* to read the whole thing. That's not how it's meant to be experienced.

So, of course, that's what I did. I read all 540,000-plus pages of the story published to date, from *Alpha Flight* to *Omega the Unknown*. Do I recommend anyone else do the same? God, no. Am I glad I did it? Absolutely.

I've spent some of my happiest days exploring the mountain of Marvels, and I wanted to get a better sense of what was in there so I could help curious travelers figure out how they might get inside it and how they might find the parts they'd like best. (I went all out so you don't have to; if you liked an *Avengers* movie and are interested in dipping a toe into its characters' comics, or read *X-Men* as a teenager and wonder what it's looked like since then, I'm here to help you have fun with that.) I also wanted to see what the Marvel narrative said as *a single body of work*: an epic among epics, Marcel Proust times Doris Lessing times Robert Altman to the power of the *Mahābhārata*.*

As a cluster of overlapping serials, with dozens running in parallel at any given time, it has a different relationship with time and sequence than most kinds of narrative art have. It doesn't really have a beginning—well, it does, but since mid-1961, where the story began is not where any member of the audience has ever been meant to join it. Instead, the Marvel story gives the reader tools to figure out the context from any entry point, reading backward and sideways as well as forward. Each individual piece of it, on its own, is *fun*—engaging, exciting, pleasing to the

*The *Mahābhārata*, in its critical edition, runs about 13,000 pages, which is roughly as many as all of the issues of *The Incredible Hulk* to date.

eye—or, at least, meant to be fun. But there’s another, different kind of fun that comes from piecing together the big story.

Marvel’s narrative also has a peculiar relationship with authorship. Legally, its “maker” is a corporation, one that’s gotten bigger over time as its body of intellectual property has changed hands. In practice, it was made by a specific group of people whose names we (mostly) know, and whose particular hands are (usually) unmistakable on any given page. But it’s also almost always been created collaboratively: if you think any one person is the sole creator of a particular image or plot point, you’re probably wrong, which is why it’s a mistake to think of any one person who’s worked on a Marvel comic book as its “author.”* On top of that, the nature of “continuity”—an important word in this context—is that every episode has to dovetail with (or at least not contradict) everything by other writers and artists that came before it or appears alongside it.

From a reader’s perspective, though, that was one of Marvel’s great innovations. You can follow any series on its own, without having to pay any mind to others; if you just want to see what Moon Knight’s up to this

*Even the question of who created Marvel’s best-known characters is also often more complicated than it looks. It’s easy enough to assess who came up with Marvel’s first superheroes of the 1960s, the Fantastic Four: Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. (Except that the Human Torch’s name and basic design had been created by Carl Burgos back in 1939.) Captain America? Kirby and Joe Simon in 1941. How about Doctor Strange? That was Steve Ditko, according to Lee’s own words (he wrote “Twas Steve’s idea” in a 1963 letter to fan Jerry Bails). Iron Man? That’s a little trickier. Lee plotted his first story, but Larry Lieber wrote its dialogue; Kirby drew the first cover and designed the character’s initial costume (which barely resembles the familiar red-and-gold one, designed by Ditko a bit later); Don Heck drew the initial story and invented what its protagonists Tony Stark and Pepper Potts look like.

Daredevil? Well, now you’re running into trouble. Lee wrote the first story, and Bill Everett drew it, but the cover was drawn by Kirby, who might have designed Daredevil’s original costume, too, although the much more familiar red costume was first drawn by Wally Wood starting in the seventh issue. When you talk about the now-familiar look and feel and mythology of “Daredevil,” though—the tormented Catholic romantic who leaps around the shadows of Hell’s Kitchen and fights ninjas and Wilson Fisk—you’re mostly talking about what Frank Miller added to the character in the ’80s, along with his artistic collaborators Klaus Janson and David Mazzucchelli. (Except that Wilson Fisk had been created by Lee and John Romita Sr. fifteen years earlier.) And so on.

month, you're good. But characters and plotlines bounce freely from one series to another, and events in any individual issue can have ramifications in any other, the same week or years later. Every little story is part of the big one, and potentially a crucial part.

That sense of shared experience, of seeing dozens of historical threads and dozens of creators' separate contributions being woven together, is a particular joy of following the Marvel Universe (with a capital *U*), as both the company and comics readers call it.* The Marvel story is not the first or only one that works like that—DC Comics, Marvel's largest competitor, and other comics publishers have adopted the “universe” template too—but it's the largest of its kind.†

It wasn't even meant to work *that* way, at first; it wasn't conceived organically in any way. The story has been driven, at every turn, by the dictates of the peculiar marketplace that sustains comics, and in recent decades by the much more profitable business of media and merchandise derived from stories that originated in comics. It grew accidentally, and it's accrued meaning accidentally, through its creators' memory lapses and misreadings and frantic attempts to meet deadlines. Even so, it's accrued a *lot* of meaning.

The Marvel story is about exploration—about seeing secret worlds within the world we know, and understanding possibilities of what we haven't yet experienced—and its parallel serials and wildly divergent creative perspectives even within a single serial make that broader understanding possible. It's high adventure, slapstick comedy, soap opera, blood-spattered horror, tender character study, and political allegory, usually all in the same week. It encompasses magnificent craft and dumb hackwork, and enduring the latter is sometimes helpful preparation for

*The “universe” part is because the story's scope isn't limited to Earth; parts of it take place deep in outer space, or in more metaphysical territory.

†That's part of why this book is about Marvel, rather than DC or some other shared universe. For all the superhero comics that DC has published since 1938, it was very slow to integrate them into anything like a coherent fictional world—and that world was rebooted in 1986 and again in 2011, discarding most of its established history.

appreciating the former. It grew with its audience, and then grew beyond successive generations of its tellers. In form and substance, it's a tribute to the astonishing powers of human imagination and to the way that human imaginations in concert with one another can do far more than they could individually. It's a tale that never ends for any of its characters, even in death.

Those characters—and there are thousands of them—include some extraordinary ones, in whose fantastic excesses you, as a reader, might potentially see parts of yourself, or see what you might hope to become or fear becoming. On any page, you're likely to encounter someone like a computer science student who can talk to squirrels and is friends with an immortal, planet-devouring god;* or an android who saved the world thirty-seven times, then moved to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and built himself a family in a catastrophically failed attempt to be more human;† or a vindictive, physically immense crimelord who has become the mayor of New York, and whose archenemy is the alter ego of the blind lawyer who serves as his deputy mayor;‡ or a woman who discovered as a teenager that she could walk through walls, was briefly possessed by a version of herself from a dystopian future, trained as a ninja, later spent months trapped inside a gigantic bullet flying through the cosmos, and is now a pirate captain;§ or a tree creature from another planet who makes remarkably expressive use of his three-word vocabulary.¶

Marvel's shared-universe schema offers an exceptionally fun way of thinking about ethical behavior that's more complicated than “good guys and bad guys.” The story's alliterative heroes, from Peter Parker to Miles Morales to Jessica Jones to Kamala Khan, rarely come into their power

*Squirrel Girl and Galactus, respectively; see chapter 20.

†The Vision.

‡The Kingpin, aka Wilson Fisk, and Daredevil; see * on p. 5.

§Kate Pryde; see chapter 10.

¶¶That's Groot, who's best known for having appeared in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies, and in the comics series of the same name beginning in 2008. An early, slightly more eloquent version of him first turned up on the cover of 1960's *Tales to Astonish* #13, bellowing “Behold! I am Groot, the invincible! Who *dares* to defy me?”

willingly; their abilities are less often something they've achieved than an unanticipated burden. Its villains are rarely beyond redemption, and are as likely as not to become its heroes or even its saviors. Even the worst of them have their reasons.

Over the course of six decades, the story has developed its own bizarre, sort-of-coherent cosmology. Marvel's Earth is the center of its universe, the most important place in all of creation. It's also "Earth-616," only one of many possible versions of the world that appear within the story. A former surgeon, who lives in a Greenwich Village town house with the ghost of his dog, perpetually defends the planet against occult attack and has seen it destroyed and rebuilt, good as new, more than once. The nexus of all of its realities is deep within a swamp in the Florida Everglades, guarded by a monster who can't abide fear. An ancient being who lived in an oxygenated zone of the moon witnessed all of the alternate possibilities for how its important events might have turned out, until he was murdered and his eyes stolen. The throne of the Marvel Universe's Hell is empty; its Norse pantheon's home once crash-landed in Oklahoma.

Some of the questions the Marvel story asks and (the short versions of) the answers it offers:

- What do gods do? (They create; they judge; they destroy.)
- What do monarchs do? (They protect their nations, even when that makes them monstrous.)
- Is there anything beyond the world we know? (There is more than we could ever possibly imagine.)
- What happens when we grow up? (We may try to put away childish things, but we can't, or shouldn't. The best thing that can happen is that we turn those things into something bigger and more beautiful.)

More than anything else, though, the Marvel world is a place of scientific miracles and of technological progress that transforms the lives of

everyone within it. Its most prominent and most fallible champions are the ones with doctorates. The telling of the Marvel story begins with a rocket flight gone wrong; the main engine of its American century is a race for technology to create the perfect soldier; its chief exponents of terror are a cult of scientists hoping to strike blows against corporate control. Some of its best-loved characters are “children of the atom,” the next step in evolution, sparked by the nuclear age. Earth-616 is recognizably our world, made stranger and richer by wonders of science—a world in which deep knowledge has always been a shield against incomprehensible horrors.

I wanted to gain deep knowledge of the story itself—to learn all there is to know about it—and I dedicated a couple of years of my life to that effort.* But Marvel has also published a lot of stuff that *isn't* part of that story, by some definition, and I had to draw the line somewhere. I came up with three questions to narrow down what I would obligate myself to read:

1. *Was it a comic book published by Marvel during the period bounded by 1961's Fantastic Four #1 and 2017's Marvel Legacy #1?*

The first issue of *Fantastic Four* is where the “Marvel Age” conventionally begins—although I ended up reading *everything* Marvel published between 1960 and 1962 anyway, and finding a slightly earlier starting point for what I think of as the story. (The endpoint was just so that I'd have an endpoint; I didn't actually stop reading there.)†

*That wasn't *all* I was doing during those years. Even so, more than one friend, on hearing about the project, immediately compared me to the cartoonist Bob Burden's absurdist mid-1980s character Flaming Carrot, who “read over 5000 comic books in a single sitting to win a bet. He won, but his mind could not take the strain.”

†The covers of those two issues suggest how much the way the story is told had changed in fifty-six years. Jack Kirby's *The Fantastic Four* cover is crammed with language and action, insistently explaining who everyone is and what's going on; Joe Quesada's *Marvel Legacy* cover focuses tightly on a few characters looking at something we can't see, and spares room only for the text of its title. (There are also elements the two images share: the interrupted arc of a circle, and a monster opening its mouth to scream.)

2. *Did it involve characters owned by Marvel?*

This actually ruled out a lot of stuff. The “ownership” rule set *Conan the Barbarian* and its related series, for instance, outside the scope of



The covers of the two comic books that were the bookends for this project: *Fantastic Four #1*, 1961 (drawn by Jack Kirby), and *Marvel Legacy #1*, 2017 (drawn by Joe Quesada and Kevin Nowlan).

this project*—at least until after 2017—so I washed my hands of them. Ditto for *Star Wars* and *G.I. Joe*, whose licensed series never crossed over with the Marvel Universe, as well as the many creator-owned comics published by the Epic and Icon imprints. Likewise with movie adaptations, and nonfiction biographies of Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa, and adaptations of L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books, and *Care Bears*, and *Marvel Classics Comics*, despite a very clever attempt I once saw to demonstrate that Fandral the Dashing from *Thor* appears in disguise in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and consequently in its *Marvel Classics* adaptation.

*If you’re thinking about bringing up the Serpent Crown, I’ll give you a nickel not to.

On the other hand, Marvel has published a few series that involve characters licensed from elsewhere interacting with Marvel's characters—*Master of Kung Fu*, *ROM: Spaceknight*, *Micronauts*, and *Godzilla* are prominent examples. All of those were within the scope of the project, and I read all of them.

3. *Could the version of Spider-Man who stars in The Amazing Spider-Man* reasonably turn up in it without the benefit of time travel, whether or not he actually does?*

This was the Great Excluder—or, as I came to think of it, the Great Time-Saver. There are a handful of series that have been wholly owned by Marvel but whose characters have never interacted with those in the big fictional universe—*Strikeforce: Morituri* comes to mind. There are also a lot of series about alternate versions of the Marvel characters: the Marvel Age imprint of stories for younger readers; most of the MAX imprint of adults-only takes on familiar characters; the MC2 line of stories about second-generation superheroes in a possible future; *Spidey Super Stories*; adaptations of various animated series; and so on. I let myself pass over those. But then there was Ultimate Marvel, a separate and distinct continuity that ran from 2000 to 2015 in comics whose titles all included the word “Ultimate.” The Ultimate titles and the main Marvel line eventually became closely connected, so I read all 600-plus Ultimate comics.

The time-travel clause was a work-around to get me off the hook from reading a giant pile of Western and war comics. It didn't stop me from reading all of Marvel's post-1958 horror and romance anthologies, though.

*You know the game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon”? The protagonist of *Amazing Spider-Man* is basically that: the character who's met everybody. The only significant Marvel character who's been on Earth at the same time as Spider-Man without yet encountering him face-to-face is Millie Collins (whose sitcom series *Millie the Model* ran 207 issues, ending in 1973)—and Spider-Man's ex, Mary Jane Watson, has worked with Millie.

And I did end up reading the entirety of the alarmingly clueless *Red Wolf*, a short-lived Western series about a Native American superhero, rather than limiting myself to the issues set in what several 1973 covers called “the holocaust of TODAY!”*

The remaining twenty-seven thousand or so issues, though,† were all on my reading list, and if you’re wondering how I tracked them all down, that wasn’t the hard part.‡ The hard part was finding enough hours in the day to read them all.

I didn’t read them in order, of course; that would have been unbearable. Instead, I grazed. I’d read *Spider-Woman* for a while, then an *Iron Man* miniseries, then some comics drawn by Leonardo Manco, then various appearances by the monstrously huge dragon Fin Fang Foom, then a bunch of early-1970s romance comics, then whatever new issues I’d bought that week.

How did I read them? Any way I could. I read them on couches, in cafés, on treadmills. I read them as yellowing issues I’d bought when they were first published, or scored at garage sales as a kid, or snagged from a dollar bin at a convention as an adult. I read them in glossy, bashed-cornered paperbacks borrowed from the library. I read them as bagged-and-boarded gems borrowed from friends. I read them as expensively “remastered” hardcover reprints, and as .cbz files of sketchy provenance, and as brittle stacks of pulp that had been lovingly reread until they’d nearly disintegrated. I read a few from a stack of back issues somebody abandoned on the table next to mine as I was working at a Starbucks one day; it just happened to include an issue of *Power Man and Iron Fist* I’d

*By which they meant, among other things, that it involves a Mohawk policewoman named Jill Tomahawk who says things like “And I’m a good cop, too—even if I *am* a woman! So don’t try to zap me with any male chauvinistic pig-ism!!!”

†My spreadsheet claims there were exactly 27,206 of them, but I don’t entirely trust it. There were some edge cases, too: an *ALF* Annual that parodies the “Evolutionary War” crossover from the same year; a *Ren & Stimpy* issue in which Dan Slott wrote Spider-Man for the first time; that sort of thing. I went ahead and read all of those, because why not?

‡The Marvel Unlimited digital service, which includes upward of twenty thousand issues, helped a lot—it has some major and minor gaps, but it was invaluable for my purposes.

been looking for. I read a hell of a lot of them on a digital tablet. I read them in the economical black-and-white “Essential” collections Marvel pumped out between 1996 and 2013, and in ragged British pulp weeklies from the ’70s. I read them from the peculiar CD-ROM collections Graphic Imaging Technology published in the mid-2000s, with hundreds of indifferently scanned issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* or *Ghost Rider*.*

And I had an absolutely great time. The best of them, old and new, were astonishing, as thrilling and imaginative as popular entertainment gets. There was also plenty of sophomoric, retrograde stuff, rushed out to serve an audience of credulous kids or bloodthirsty nostalgics. I was often aware that I was gorging myself on something made for cherry-picking and nibbling, indulging the worst part of the collector’s impulse: the part that strives for completeness rather than for enjoyment. Fortunately, by the time I’d waded too far into the piles of *Nightstalkers* and *Skull the Slayer* and *Marvel Double Feature: Thunderstrike/Code Blue* to turn around, a small but useful transformation had come over me.

I realized that I’d become able to find *something* to enjoy in just about any issue, new or old. Sometimes, it was a detail that connected to another one on the story’s perpetually expanding canvas. (It’s a truism about superhero comics that nobody ever stays dead, but it’s more broadly true that *nothing* in them goes away forever. Any character or gizmo or situation that’s ever appeared in the Marvel narrative is fair game for any of the story’s subsequent tellers; someone a decade or three later will inevitably come up with a plot in which Crystar the Crystal Warrior or Arcanna Jones or the Leader’s Brain-Wave Booster can serve some purpose, and it will be richer for a reader who recognizes that element from the first time around.)

*I didn’t *intend* to read any at the Burning Man art festival in the Nevada desert in the summer of 2019; the only comics I had brought with me were a few copies, to give away, of 1998’s *X-Force* #75, in which the team attends the same event, transparently disguised as the “Exploding Colossal Man” festival. But somebody had set up a little memorial shrine for Stan Lee, and at its base there was a box labeled READ ME, containing some battered but intact fifty-year-old issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Thor* and *Tales of Suspense*, and what was I going to do, *not* read them?

Other times, it was some display of a creator's idiolect. Longtime comics readers know that one of the delights of following particular characters for years is seeing the moments at which they act *in character*, doing something unexpected that's still absolutely consistent with what we know of them. There's a very similar joy in observing comics creators being who they are—when there's a line of dialogue or a line of ink that could have come from nobody else's hand.

Most often, though, what made otherwise iffy older comics come alive for me was the ways they reflected the moments at which they were made. Before “collectibility” infected them, periodical comic books were sold alongside newspapers and designed to be thrown out with them, and they're kind of a much more colorful, metaphorical version of the same thing. Comics dramatize the cultural conflicts and fears of their time, and that subtext is often clearer in dull or hacky comics than in aesthetically satisfying ones.* Even the apparatus around the stories themselves illuminates their historical context. (You can learn a lot about the race and gender politics of the 1970s and '80s by reading the letters to the editor that were printed in *Hero for Hire* or *The Punisher* or *Ms. Marvel*, or looking at the ads that interrupted those stories every few pages.)

My background is in pop music criticism, and one of the things I've learned from it is that if a piece of art of any kind becomes popular, that means there's something about it that commands an audience's attention and gives them pleasure in a way that other things, even similar things, don't.† There are lots of commercial failures that are artistic triumphs, of

*The “Living Mummy” feature that ran in *Supernatural Thrillers* from 1973 to 1975, for instance, is... a real mess, actually, but a fascinating mess, an evocation of the early '70s' conflation of archaeology and mysticism, as well as the craze around the “Treasures of Tutankhamun” tour. It includes what might be Marvel's first same-sex couple, as well as some wild psychedelic artwork by Tom Sutton in its final episode.

†I occasionally hear the argument that popular success in culture has to do only with what big corporations decide to shove down the throat of the public. The backing of a capitalist machine can absolutely help resonant art reach its audience, but all the money in the world can't make a hit out of something nobody wants. To quote W. H. Auden, “Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.”

course, and I'll wave the flag for plenty of those in the chapters that follow. But every hit comic book, like every hit record, has something exceptional about it,* and part of the job of critics who are interested in this particular subfield is to figure out what those exceptional things are. It can be hard to do, and sometimes I can't manage it; that's my failing. Sometimes I can see what's exceptional but am not moved by it myself; that has more to do with my tastes and preferences.

Again, though, the fact that Marvel's comics have always been so entirely a commercial enterprise means that the ones that have thrived in the market at any given moment, regardless of who has been writing or drawing them, responded to some kind of craving in their audience of that moment.† The early parts of the Marvel story were unabashedly power fantasies for children. As superhero comics' narrative style has grown up along with their audience, those fantasies' messier subtexts have bubbled up and been addressed head-on. Looking at close to sixty years of *Spider-Man* or *Captain America*, you can clearly make out the rise and fall of particular cultural aspirations and of the storytelling modes that conveyed them.

As you explore the Marvel story, it becomes another world you can call your own, one that's constantly expanding and full of unfinished wonders. You can no more exhaust its possibilities than the real world's. (I have tried.) And spending time in that world can make you better equipped to live in the real one: more curious about how its systems fit together; more willing to explore what you don't yet understand, and accept that you can't know everything; more open to hope in the face of catastrophe; more aware that no matter how overwhelming your own life may seem, it's only part of a much bigger picture.

*Thanks to Robert Christgau, whose formulation I'm stealing here.

†Sometimes they find mass appeal by taking artistic risks; they're cheap enough to produce that failed experiments aren't ruinous.