IN THIS CHAPTER

- Recognizing what sets Marvel Comics apart
- Breaking down the variety of character types
- Previewing the legendary sagas

Chapter 1
Getting to Know Marvel Comics

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Existing in today's modern media landscape without hearing or knowing *something* about Marvel Comics is pretty much impossible. Whether you've heard of them through movies or online or from literally thousands of people wearing Marvel T-shirts, you know that Marvel Comics is a major presence in the world. What you probably don't know is how long Marvel has been around, how vast its universe is, and how many heroes and villains have roamed its pages. If you're already a little acquainted with Marvel, that's great! You may run into some familiar faces while you pick up some new things. But if you're new here, I sort of envy you because you're about to embark an amazing journey loaded with strange alien worlds, mythic landscapes, diabolical villains, and a colorful army of heroes ready to save the day.

What's Unique About Marvel Comics

Comic books have been one of America's favorite art forms for decades. They're a marriage of art and dialogue assembled by talented creators to tell all kinds of stories. Since the beginning, readers have had as many kinds of comics available as

they have types of prose literature. You can find humor, horror, action, mystery, and more. One of the most enduringly popular branches of comic book storytelling has been the super-hero story. Masked individuals with exceptional powers and abilities have been a major part of comics' appeal since the 1930s. And one of the most popular makers of those kinds of comics has long been Marvel Comics.

A shared universe

The first thing to understand about Marvel Comics in particular is that they take place in the *Marvel Universe.* It's an ongoing story that started, appropriately enough, in *Marvel Comics* #1, shown in Figure 1-1. Released on August 31, 1939, when the company was still called Timely Comics, that issue set the stage for everything that follows. It introduced two major heroes: the original Human Torch (in a story by writer/artist Carl Burgos) and Sub-Mariner (by writer/artist Bill Everett). That their adventures took place in the same shared universe soon became clear.



FIGURE 1-1: It all starts here: the cover to *Marvel Comics* #1.

Cover art by Frank Paul.

A *shared universe* means that the characters all live in the same fictional world. Events that affect one character's city affect other characters who live in that city, too. The shared universe also allows characters to meet up, team up, and even do battle against each other. Early on, Human Torch and Namor the Sub-Mariner found themselves at odds and had an epic battle in New York City, resulting in a kind of story now known as a *crossover* (see Figure 1-2). In the comics world, that's what you call a meeting between two characters who have their own ongoing stories. Marvel was building a whole universe around its interconnected characters.

But perhaps even more important is that — despite the fact that Marvel was telling stories about people from under the sea and heroic androids — it was telling stories that were set *in the real world*. Yes, heroes and villains may visit other planets or mythical locations like Atlantis, but New York City was New York City. In other comics, the creators frequently created fictional settings and hometowns for their characters. Not Marvel. The Big Apple was the hub around which the universe eventually turned. Real locations, real city streets, and even real people were easily identifiable in the stories. That attention to detail created the sense that the Marvel Universe was really "the world outside your window," meaning that you could almost be part of the stories, too.


REMEMBER

That real world setting became one of the two biggest things that made Marvel Comics unique in the great tapestry of the comics world. I cover the second in the following section.

Amazing, relatable heroes

Alongside the shared universe (see the preceding section), the other half of Marvel's unique magic came in the form of the heroes themselves. Whether they come from the realms of Norse myth or are created by amazingly advanced science, every Marvel hero shares a quality with all human beings: They have flaws. In the old myths and legends from cultures around the world, and in very early mass entertainment, heroes were often presented as flawless paragons of virtue. They always did the right thing and made the right choice, and very little seemed to get in the way of that rightness. Their perfection may have made those characters seem larger than life and extremely heroic, but it didn't make them seem *real.*

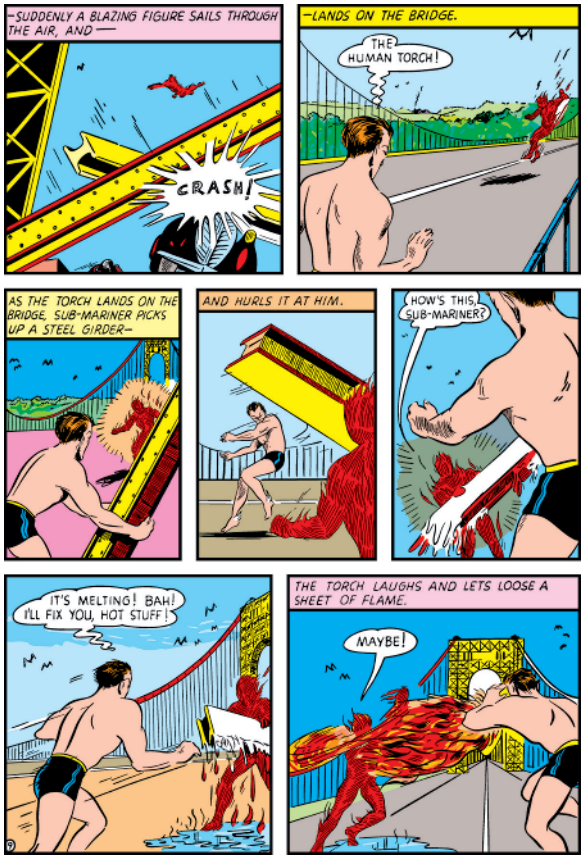


FIGURE 1-2: When titans clash: Human Torch and Namor first meet in *Marvel Mystery Comics* #8.

Story and Art by Bill Everett.

Marvel Heroes *always* have relatable issues that make readers sympathetic while allowing them to see themselves in the characters.

- Captain America has always strived to uphold the ideals of the United States, but occasionally he finds himself at odds with people who don't share his vision or, worse, people who try to corrupt the system from within. So Cap often finds himself struggling to maintain his idealism in a cynical world.
- The Hulk's alter ego, Bruce Banner, experienced a childhood full of trauma that left him with a boiling rage beneath an intellectual (occasionally even meek) personality. But after the accident that turned him into the Hulk, all Bruce's repressed anger exploded into his green-skinned form, leading him into an ongoing struggle to balance his emotions and maintain control.
- The mutant members of the X-Men have found themselves feared and hated by the people they try to protect just because they were born different, a situation that's strikingly familiar to people from marginalized backgrounds around the world.



REMEMBER

That identification between the heroes and the readers — that relatability — is the secret ingredient that has been the engine of Marvel Comics all along. It's not just the real world setting. It's the real world *problems* that make the Marvel Universe unique, and it's what continued to drive the bond between the fans and the characters for almost a century.

Spider-Man: Marvel's most relatable hero

Perhaps no Marvel Comics hero has ever been more like the readers than Peter Parker, the Amazing Spider-Man (see Figure 1-3), created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko. After losing his parents at a young age and going to live with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben, Peter struggled with a number of things that the readership could easily understand. His family never had very much money, which created social problems at school. Apart from that, Peter was also brilliant — a budding genius — making him a target for bullies like his high school nemesis (but later friend) Flash Thompson. Even though Peter grew up a good kid with loving surrogate parents, high school life was a struggle.

However, being bitten by that radioactive spider created an entirely new dimension to Peter's problems. He confronted a jarring life lesson when Uncle Ben died as the indirect result of Peter's refusal to stop a criminal. That tragedy drove home an earlier lesson that Uncle Ben had tried to teach him: that great responsibility must accompany great power. Trying to live his life by that creed, Peter Parker used his abilities as Spider-Man to protect his city and, quite often, the world.

That moment of realization didn't make anything easier for Peter. Far from it. The perpetual juggling of school, work, financial struggles, friendships, and romantic relationships was hard enough; then he had to balance that with all the extra complications that came from his role as Spider-Man. Peter also knew that his very existence as a hero could put the lives of his friends and loved ones in danger, a frequent issue he couldn't always avoid.

The readers saw themselves in Peter from all kinds of angles. Who can't identify with money problems? Who hasn't felt alone in a room full of people or felt isolation because something about them was different from the others? No one's family or love life ever sailed completely smoothly. And although the readers probably didn't understand what fighting Doctor Octopus in Midtown Manhattan would be like, they got that feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you're late for work or mess up a date.

For more on Spider-Man's origins, check out Chapter 4.



FIGURE 1-3: Introducing the Amazing Spider-Man!

Cover Art by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko.

A Universe of Iconic Characters

The Marvel Universe is populated by . . . billions of regular people. But in and among the everyday citizens, you find an incredible array of heroes, antiheroes (or, people who do heroic things by questionable means), and villains. Some of them have their origins in advanced science, while others draw their special abilities from magic or the far reaches of space. Whether they're champions or criminals, these iconic characters exist right alongside people and places that are very familiar to those who live in the real world.

- **Gods:** Some of the heroes of Marvel Comics, like Thor, emerged from Earth's myths and legends.
- **Mutants:** *Mutants* are humans who are born with super-powers. In the Marvel Universe, mutants have existed for centuries, but because of the overall increase in the Earth's background radiation that began with atom bomb testing in the 1940s, more and more children are being born with mutant, or X, genes. Professor Charles Xavier founded his School of Gifted Youngsters to find mutants and train them in their powers to coexist with the rest of humanity.
- **Aliens:** The Marvel Universe is home to vast galaxies full of inhabited planets. And though some alien races, like the Kree, can look a lot like humans, other alien races can have wildly different appearances and natural abilities that are the equivalent of super-powers. The Skrulls have the ability to change their shape and appearance, a talent that's caused more than a little trouble on Earth over the years. A secondary group of aliens are *cosmic beings,* characters of enormous power who sometimes participate in the adventures of Earth's heroes. The Silver Surfer is one such being. Another one is the Phoenix, avatar of the Phoenix Force, who has played a significant role in the lives of the X-Men.
- **Enhanced/altered humans:** Although mutants are born with their powers, *enhanced* or *altered humans* have acquired their powers through advanced science, and quite often by accident. The Hulk was originally unleashed when Bruce Banner was exposed to a gamma bomb blast; that incident caused the change in Banner's body that led to his transforming into the green goliath whenever he got angry. The original members of the Fantastic Four got their powers from exposure to cosmic rays while in space. Then you have Spider-Man, possibly the most famous recipient of an irradiated spider bite.
- **High-tech heroes:** Many, many heroes and villains employ advanced technology in their suits and weapons. Some heroes aren't just born; they're built: Though he originally constructed his first pieces of armor as a device to save his own life, Tony Stark has become that most famous of high-tech

heroes, Iron Man. And the mutant Wolverine's adamantium-covered skeleton and claws are the results of experimentation by the Weapon X program.

- **Magic and supernatural beings:** With so many cosmic forces at play in the Marvel Comics, you probably aren't surprised to discover that magic is real in the Marvel Universe. One of the greatest of all magic practitioners is the Sorcerer Supreme, Doctor Stephen Strange. He learned his discipline through rigorous study. Other heroes have been enhanced by supernatural beings, like Moon Knight, who has operated as an agent of Khonshu, the Egyptian god of the moon.
- **Highly skilled/zero powers:** Many high-tech heroes lack super-powers, but a number of unpowered heroes rely on advanced training and only the occasional gadget to wage their war on the baddies. Hawkeye deploys a variety of trick arrows and fights with incredible skills he developed over years of experience. Fierce fighters like Elektra are products of incredible discipline and intense training rather than any otherworldly power.

Understanding the Connections and Affiliations

The earlier "A Universe of Iconic Characters" section covers the types of heroes and villains you may encounter in the Marvel realm. The following sections take a broader look at more of these iconic heroes and villains and how they relate to each other and the world around them.

The early days

Earth has always had its defenders. Before even the likes of Thor and Hercules, human heroes rose in ancient times. Thor's father, Odin, belonged to a team of heroes that were the forerunners of another assemblage, the Avengers. Centuries later, in the Old American West, heroes like Two-Gun Kid and Rawhide Kid rode in the name of justice.

The original Human Torch and Namor, the Sub-Mariner, emerged just prior to the second World War. They were soon joined by other heroes, like Captain America; his sidekick, Bucky; Torch's own sidekick, Toro; and British heroes Spitfire and Union Jack. They formed the nucleus of the Invaders, a team that fought for the Allies against the Axis powers. Unfortunately, Cap and Bucky were presumed dead after plunging into the icy waters of the Atlantic while stopping an assault on America.

Other heroes rose and fell in the intervening years, but the real Marvel Age began when four friends took a rocket ride that changed their lives. The cosmic rays they encountered granted them fantastic powers. And they stood at the forefront of a new universe of heroes.

New York's home teams

No matter how far into the deep recesses of space the Marvel Universe stretches, the whole thing still rotates around New York City. The deepest concentration of Marvel Comics heroes operate out of the greater metropolitan area and one particular school upstate. Two of the greatest teams of Marvel heroes, the Fantastic Four and the Avengers (both created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby), have regularly worked from headquarters in the city.


REMEMBER

By basing so many adventures in and around New York, the chances for heroes to bump into each other dramatically increases. Spider-Man commonly lends Daredevil a hand or consults with the Fantastic Four on a case, and no one's surprised if other heroes arrive to pitch in when the Avengers are tangling with the Masters of Evil downtown.

The Fantastic Four

Four Freedoms Plaza at 42nd Street and Madison Avenue also contains the Baxter Building, the traditional home and headquarters of the Fantastic Four (FF). The team's four original, and most consistent, members are

- Mister Fantastic (Reed Richards)
- The Invisible Woman (Susan Richards, his wife)
- The Human Torch (Johnny Storm, Sue's brother)
- The Thing (Ben Grimm, Reed's best friend)

Among the other regular residents are Reed and Sue's children, genius Valeria and super-powered mutant Franklin (who can currently only access his secret powers once a year).

The FF are among the most popular and beloved heroes in New York. They've traditionally been able to handle their massive operating budget through all of Reed's various patents and inventions. They're widely recognized as heroes, but the world also treats them as celebrities. The tabloids have always paid close attention to Johnny's various relationships, and Reed and Susan's wedding was a massive social event. See Chapter 5 for more info on the storylines of the Fantastic Four.

The Avengers

Besides the Fantastic Four, the other major team that usually operates out of New York is the mighty Avengers, shown in Figure 1-4. Though they've employed more advanced bases like the Avengers Mountain at the North Pole and the Impossible City in Earth's orbit, the Avengers have historically primarily operated out of Avengers Mansion and Avengers Tower in the city.



Story by Kurt Busiek. Art by George Pérez and Al Vey.

FIGURE 1-4:
The Avengers assemble . . . well . . . everybody.



Over the years, the Avengers took on the role of rapid-response team to Earth-threatening emergencies. They commonly traveled into space to take on the threats posed by the likes of the Kree-Skrull War, Korvac, and Thanos. The team even began to expand, launching a West Coast branch under the leadership of Hawkeye because the number of cross-country and global threats had become so large that more than one team was necessary.

A very special school

Around the time the Avengers formed, Jean Grey reported for her first day at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. Located at 1407 Graymalkin Lane in Westchester, New York, the school operated under the direction of Professor Charles Xavier. The institution presented a public face as a program for advanced students, but it was secretly a school where Professor X trained young mutants how to use and control their powers. Xavier wanted his students to prove to humanity that they could coexist with mutants, and he organized them into a team to protect a world that frequently feared and hated them. They were called the X-Men, shown in Figure 1-5.

The first class of X-Men included the telekinetic Jean (Marvel Girl), the high-flying Angel, the acrobatic Beast, the young Iceman, and team leader Cyclops. Their initial missions put them into conflict with Magneto, Master of Magnetism. Magneto had been a longtime friend of Xavier's, but Xavier's philosophy of peaceful coexistence ran counter to Magneto's more militaristic vision for mutantkind. As such, he and his Brotherhood sought to battle humanity to assure mutant domination. Frequently, the only thing standing between him and his goals were the young X-Men.



FIGURE 1-5: The new X-Men prepare to rescue the original team from the clutches of Krakoa.

Story by Len Wein. Art by Dave Cockrum.

Other Marvel teams

The Fantastic Four, Avengers, and X-Men are just a sampling of the teams that strive to protect the world in Marvel Comics. Here are a few more of note:

- Informal groups like the Defenders tend to gather when the need arises.
- Government-sponsored groups include the Thunderbolts or Canada's Alpha Flight.
- The intelligence and intervention agency S.H.I.E.L.D. counts super-powered humans among its agents.
- Secretive societies of the genetically altered Inhumans and the Celestial-created Eternals also step up to protect humanity.

Gritty, streetwise heroes

Beyond the teams of heroes I cover in the preceding sections are many other champions who operate in a variety of different ways. New York City alone is home to dozens of heroes who operate at more of a street level, protecting people from crime, terror, and their own class of super-villainy.

- **Spider-Man:** Chief among these heroes is Spider-Man. Though the *Daily Bugle* has often portrayed him as a menace, most New Yorkers know that their friendly neighborhood Spider-Man is a protector of the people. And although he has fought alongside the likes of the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, his heart has never left helping the helpless on the streets of his city.
- **Daredevil:** Daredevil is another hero who fights for the greater good, but he has always had a special affinity for protecting the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen. His circle of allies includes the likes of super-strong Luke Cage; martial artists Iron Fist, Elektra, Shang-Chi; the mysterious Moon Knight; and more.
- **The Punisher:** An occasional grudging ally of the street-level heroes of New York is the Punisher. Though the other heroes have a disdain for killing that the Punisher doesn't share, they sometimes find themselves on the same side, fighting against organized crimes and other threats that are greater than their philosophical divides.

Defender against the shadows of the supernatural

One of the world's greatest defenders against that darkness is Doctor Stephen Strange, who operates out of his Sanctum Santorum at 177A Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. As Sorcerer Supreme, Strange has fought against mad gods, extradimensional beings, and monsters of all kinds. And though he's connected with other super-heroes and has even served in the Avengers and Defenders, Strange also has a loose affiliation with other supernatural heroes who occasionally go by the name of the Midnight Suns. The vampire hunter Blade, the Spirit of Vengeance known as Ghost Rider, the living vampire Morbius, the Werewolf by Night, and the macabre Man-Thing are just some of the bizarre allies that Strange has cultivated while trying to hold back the night.

Heroes in outer space

Above the night sky and out into the depths of space, you find even more heroes with close ties to Earth. The Guardians of the Galaxy have been through several incarnations, but this group of cosmic heroes often battles some of the same

threats that have menaced the people of Earth. Though the Guardians often deal with enemies that arise in deep space, their missions can and do carry them back to Earth.

Villains, villains everywhere

Of course, the need for heroes in such numbers wouldn't be as great if not for the major threats to be found on- and off-world. Whether their challenges come from outer space or the outer boroughs, the dark of night or the Dark Dimension, the heroes of Marvel Comics have no shortage of enemies to battle. Some of Marvel's most iconic villains include Loki, Galactus, Thanos, Doctor Doom, Red Skull, Magneto, and a host of Spider-Man's adversaries. For more on Marvel's many villains, check out Chapter 5.

Infinite Sagas

The adventures you find in Marvel Comics can run from personal crises to stories that are absolutely epic in scope. These tales tend to build on one another, creating rich histories for each character or team that weave together in a broader tapestry that's the story of the Marvel Universe. Sometimes, these important sagas are confined to the pages of one series. But in other instances, the story is so big that it breaks out of one series and spans across several, drawing in many other titles and characters before a massive conclusion.

You've probably heard of some of these great storylines: Secret Invasion, Demon in Bottle, Dark Phoenix Saga, Civil War, and Infinity Gauntlet. I summarize these stories and more in Chapter 8.

CONQUERORS OF ALL MEDIA

At this point, Marvel has conquered probably every avenue of media outside of comics. Video games? Almost too many to count. LEGO sets? Ditto. Live-action TV series? From the 1970s through today, Marvel has been a fixture on the tube. And these days, you can't mention Marvel without at least alluding to the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU), one of the most ambitious ongoing storytelling sequences in the history of cinema. Inspired by Marvel's own sagas from the comics, the MCU has gone on to become a cultural phenomenon.

COMIC BOOK LINGO

Here are a few terms related to the comics industry that you might want to know:

- An *editor* is the person who puts together the creative team that produces a comic book story. A full team usually includes a writer, a penciller, an inker, a colorist, and a letterer.
- The *writer* typically plots the story and writes the dialogue. Writers frequently work in close collaboration with the penciller. Occasionally, you'll see credits for "plotting" or "co-plotting"; that usually means more than one writer collaborated on the storyline.
- *Artist* is a term that sort of generically applies to the penciller, but pencillers, inkers, colorists, and letterers are all art professionals. The *penciller* produces the initial art, while the *inker* uses ink to render depth and shading to the penciller's work. The *colorist*, well, adds color to the art, and the *letterer* handles the words on the page.
- A *series* is an ongoing comic book title of no predetermined length. A *miniseries* is a shorter story set to run for a certain number of issues. An *annual* is a special that comes out once per year.