

FANTASTIC FOUR IN THE BRONZE AGE!

BACKISSUE!



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**Celebrating
the Best
Comics of
the '70s, '80s,
'90s, and Beyond!**

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BACK ISSUE

Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!



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Art by Earl Norem, from the children's storybook *Fantastic Four: Island of Doom* (Marvel Books, 1984). TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

The World's Greatest Comic Magazine!

THE FANTASTIC FOUR IN THE 1970s

by Jarrod Buttery



STAN LEE

JACK KIRBY

Stan and Jack. It's possible the comics industry might have survived without them. There's a chance that we may be reading comics—and even magazines about comics—today, although they'd almost certainly be very different. But it is impossible to overestimate the contribution these two creators made to the industry, starting with *Fantastic Four* #1 (Nov. 1961).

Stan Lee and Jack Kirby produced 102 consecutive issues of *Fantastic Four*, plus six Annuals, before Kirby left Marvel Comics. John Romita, Sr. took over as artist with issue #103 (Oct. 1970), penciling the last two installments of a three-part story featuring Magneto and the Sub-Mariner. Romita also drew the next two issues as Johnny's Inhuman girlfriend, Crystal, leaves the team. Her physiology is no longer able to withstand the pollution of our world and she is forced to return to the Inhumans' city of Attilan. John Buscema took over with *FF* #107, as Ben Grimm is given the ability to change back and forth into the Thing.

Fantastic Four #108 (Mar. 1971) used portions of an uncompleted Lee/Kirby story, introducing the character of Janus the Nega-Man. Kirby's original intentions were reconstructed and documented by John Morrow in *Fantastic Four: The Lost Adventure* #1 (Apr. 2008). Buscema depicted the return of Annihilus in issues #109–110, followed by the rampage of the Thing—driven insane by his latest “cure” in issue #111. A crazed Thing is confronted by the Hulk, in one of their classic slugfests, in *FF* #112.

The next four issues depicted the threat of the Overmind. Stan Lee plotted the whole story but Archie Goodwin scripted issues #115–116, becoming the first person besides Stan to write *Fantastic Four*. Roy Thomas explained the situation in Tom DeFalco's book, *Comics Creators on Fantastic Four* (Titan Books, 2005): “Stan was going to do a movie project with Alain Resnais and he needed to get rid of the few remaining books on his plate. I wanted to write *Fantastic Four* [but] I took [Amazing] *Spider-Man* because that's what Stan wanted me to do.”

With Reed possessed by the seemingly limitless mental powers of the alien Overmind and the entire Earth about to be destroyed, Sue turns to an unexpected ally—after all, it's Dr. Doom's world, too. Doom initially refuses to help and Sue laments that, despite their past differences, she had always thought him noble. In one of his character-defining speeches, Doom replies, “Many demons rule Victor von Doom, but not those of pettiness or fear. Very well, I am with you.” With Doom's (and the Stranger's)

The World's Greatest Comic Makers!

Stan “The Man” Lee and Jack “King” Kirby, co-creators of the *Fantastic Four*, were winding down their collaboration by the time issue #100 (July 1970) arrived in the early Bronze Age. Fans wondered, would the *FF* survive without them? Cover by Kirby and Joe Sinnott.

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Bad Ben and Bad Guy by Big John

(left) Original art page from "The Thing Amok," from *Fantastic Four* #111 (June 1971), by Stan Lee, John Buscema, and Joe Sinnott. Courtesy of Anthony Snyder (www.anthonyscomic-bookart.com). (right) The same art team on the cover to issue #120 (Mar. 1972). Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

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help, the Overmind is defeated in issue #116 (Nov. 1971)—the tenth anniversary of the book's debut. This was also the month that Marvel briefly flirted with increasing the size of its comics from 36 to 52 pages, making this issue an extra-sized spectacular.

Goodwin also wrote the following two issues as Johnny attempts to reunite with Crystal—only to find her under the hypnotic control of Diablo. The conclusion in issue #118 (Jan. 1972) was only 15 pages long. The comic included a six-page backup story where Ben and Lockjaw travel to an Alternate-Earth, meeting a Reed Richards who became the Thing. Thomas was asked if he had any insights into the origin of this short story: "That was the time when the books had jumped to 52 pages for one or two issues ... then publisher Goodman suddenly decreed that we go back to 36 pages. That left us having to split stories in two and fill the back-end of the second issues with other material. I did a King Kull poem in *Conan* and a short story in *Hulk*. Archie came up with this one. I think all these things turned out rather well, considering they were emergency fill-ins."

Thomas wrote issue #119 (Feb. 1972), depicting the Black Panther imprisoned in a neighboring African country: "One of the last remaining strongholds of

white supremacy upon our continent." Therein, T'Challa announces that he has changed his alias to the Black Leopard. When Ben inquires about the change, T'Challa replies: "I contemplate a return to your country, Ben Grimm, where the latter term has ... political connotations."

The change didn't last long, as T'Challa reclaimed the Panther title in *Avengers* #105 (Nov. 1972). "Stan insisted that 'Panther' become 'Leopard,' to avoid confusion with the Black Panthers group," explains Thomas. "I didn't like the idea, but saw his point. Stan soon saw that 'Black Leopard' didn't work as well, so he wanted it changed back."

Stan returned for a four-part Galactus story—which also introduced his newest herald, Air-Walker—in issues #120–123, followed by the two-part return of the Monster from

the Lost Lagoon. His duties calling him elsewhere, Stan left the title for good—handing it over to Thomas who, in issue #126 (Sept. 1972), retold the FF's origin and first adventure. This progressed into a three-way subterranean conflict between Mole Man (from *FF*), Tyrannus (from *Incredible Hulk*), and Kala (from the Iron Man story in *Tales of Suspense* #43, July 1963). "As you probably know, I've always enjoyed tying together threads of the Marvel Universe," confirms Thomas.



ROY THOMAS

BATTLEGROUND: THE BAXTER BUILDING

Injecting some cosmetic changes, Thomas changed Johnny's costume to red and asked Buscema to draw Johnny's flame a little more realistically. Sue is also depicted more three-dimensionally—chafing when Reed suggests she 'stay home with the baby.' This comes to a head in issue #130. After defeating the Frightful Four, Sue snaps, "In the heat of battle, you didn't think of me as a member of the team—not even as a wife—only as the 'mother of your child!'"

Sue leaves with Franklin, but Medusa, who helped against the villains, stays with the team. Part one of this story, in issue #129 (Dec. 1972), introduced Thundra—initially as a new member of the Frightful Four, but someone who would soon become an ally of our heroes. Still pining over his girlfriend, Johnny gatecrashes Attilan in issue #131—discovering that Crystal has fallen in love with Quicksilver! Thomas told DeFalco: "I was trying to shake things up a little bit. I had no great feelings for Crystal as a character. I thought it would be fun to get rid of her and I liked the idea of bringing in Quicksilver." Everyone must put aside their differences in issue #132 to battle Omega, an artificial being powered by the racial prejudice of the Inhumans toward their sub-caste Alpha Primitives. Did Thomas want to highlight the plight of the Alpha Primitives? "I guess so. I didn't think of it that way ... just as a reasonably good story idea that made a point."

Gerry Conway became the regular writer of *Fantastic Four* with issue #133 (Apr. 1973), featuring the return of Thundra. Conway admits a liking for strong female characters and was asked if this was a fun issue to



GERRY CONWAY

commence his run: "It was fun for a couple of reasons. First of all, I was taking over from Roy, who had plotted the issue. My job was basically just to come in and write the dialogue, which made it much easier for me to start off on the book because I wasn't required to come up with my own idea right off the bat. But the two things that made it really special for me was, one, writing a character like Thundra, who is a very powerful female figure. The second, and probably more fanboyish element for me, was the opportunity to work with [artist] Ramona Fradon, who was also a powerful female, whose work I had really loved for years on *Metamorpho*. She was such an interesting stylist and so different from anything than any artist that had been working at Marvel at that time. It was a lot of fun."

Immediately from issue #134, Conway exhibits his penchant for subplots and Marvel history. Having lost Crystal, Johnny decides to visit old girlfriend Dorrie Evans, staple of

Ladies Welcome!

(left) Buscema/Sinnott cover to *FF* #133 (Apr. 1973), with Thundra (and *FF* member Medusa). (right) Interior art page from that issue (courtesy of Heritage) penciled and signed by the artist best known for DC's *Aquaman* and *Metamorpho*, Ramona Fradon. Inks by Sinnott.

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Ol' Greenskin's Back!

(right) Hulk smashed his way into *Fantastic Four* #166 (Jan. 1976). Cover by Buckler and Dan Adkins. (left) Arthur Adams' recreation of that cover, in pencil form. Courtesy of Heritage.

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE POWERS GONE?

Exposure to gamma radiation while battling the Hulk in issues #166–167 transforms the Thing back into Ben Grimm. Needing a replacement, Reed hires Luke Cage, Power Man. In DeFalco's *FF* book, Thomas was asked why he had Cage join the team: "Partly because he was a black character and I thought it would be interesting to have a black guy in the FF. Partly because I helped create Luke Cage, but had never really written him. And partly because Luke had super-strength like the Thing and filled the same niche. Luke was also a powerful outsider, but in a different way from Ben Grimm. I never intended this change to be permanent but I had a lot of fun doing it."

Discussing substitute team members, Buckler states, "Medusa, I never had a problem with. She just seemed to fit right in. I don't know if Luke Cage was a good fit, though, since he wasn't really a team player. He shook things up a lot and he did keep things lively and interesting. But a replacement for the Thing? As Ben Grimm would put it: 'Ya gotta be kiddin' me!'"

Luke certainly acquits himself immediately, defeating the Wrecker in issue #168 (Mar. 1976). Surprisingly, after years of moaning about being the Thing, Ben Grimm immediately starts whining about no longer having any powers! He even takes a swing at the upstart taking his place, and quickly discovers why you don't punch a man with steel-hard skin. Explaining that Luke was only a temporary replacement, Reed presents Ben with a Thing-exoskeleton in *FF* #170. Finally having the best of both worlds—the ability to be both Ben Grimm *and* the Thing—does Ben thank his oldest friend? No, he complains that he just doesn't feel like a superhero any more. Was Ben being too much of a jerk? "Try living in his shoes (or overgrown feet) for a few years and see what it does to you," responds Thomas.

Buckler recalls the story: "There were no writers' conferences back then, and no talking the story over with the writer. I did have story input, though. I didn't come up with plot lines or anything, but with Gerry and Roy, ideas were always welcome. And I loved working with those two writers especially. I remember one time I suggested that Ben Grimm lose his powers and revert to human form for a spell. My idea was to have him go through an identity crisis and have Reed invent some kind of exoskeleton gizmo that would enable him to be the Thing again.

"The way things were done at Marvel, the artist was actually a co-storyteller," Buckler says. "Nothing was done full-script. So with story plots to work from, that gave the artist a lot of freedom to interpret. Actual story pacing, and what was shown on what page and how—that was left up to the artist. My main concern was getting the characters right and keeping the story moving, and to make that as exciting and dramatic as possible. I remember, many times when a fight scene was called for, the written version would read



HUMAN TORCH

SOLO, A NO-GO

by **Jonathan Rikard Brown**
with assistance from Robert Brown



A *Johnny Storm/Human Torch solo series has never sparked into a blaze*. While there have been attempts to stoke the fire, this member of the Fantastic Four has never been able to ignite a solo book of his own. (Okay, enough with the fire puns...)

JOHNNY STORM'S STRANGE TALES

The first attempt to spin off Johnny into a solo series was from Marvel megastars and Fantastic Four co-creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, at the behest of publisher Martin Goodman, who purportedly wished to emulate the success of former Marvel headliner the Golden Age Human Torch.

In 1962, the Lee/Kirby duo—originally with Larry Lieber scripting over Lee's plots and Dick Ayers inking Kirby's pencils—launched a series of Human Torch short stories (originally 13 pages, but over time varying in length from 12 to 14 pages) in the anthology comic book *Strange Tales*, starting with issue #101 (Oct. 1962). These stories attempted to create a connection between the (young) reader and the star of the comic, with Johnny Storm experiencing the negative side of his powers and the isolation felt when one has abilities that creates a secret life.

On page one of the Torch's first solo tale, titled "The Human Torch," we see that Johnny lives in a quiet suburban town, and while the locals know that his sister has taken on the persona of Invisible Girl, Johnny's ability to burst into flame is shielded from other citizens. (There is an editor's note about some graduates from Johnny's school knowing his status, but they have moved on with their lives.) The story shows how our hero's everyday life has been altered as we are given the layout of his room, which Mr. Fantastic has outfitted with asbestos (!) to keep Johnny from burning down the house when he has a bad dream.

The story continues to show an isolated Johnny's entanglement with a new villain known simply as the Destroyer. As the Human Torch engages this new foe in an amusement park, we see him struggle to keep his FF identity a secret while building meaningful relationships as Johnny. At one point, Johnny ducks into a cabin to flame off and is confronted by his friends. In a very Clark Kent-ish moment, Johnny simply replies, "I spotted [the Torch] in the woods and followed him to the cabin! I wanted to discover his real identity! He got away!!"

Strange Tales would develop a supporting cast for the Torch that included his sister, Sue Storm, and love interest Doris (Dorrie) Evans. The series attempted to develop a rogues' gallery for the young protagonist, though none of these villains achieved the iconic status like Dr. Doom or Namor. As the series progressed it became clear that readers and Johnny were having a hard time connecting. By issue #123 (July 1964), the

Great Balls of Fire!

Bronze Age-era fans remember this short-lived reprint series starring the FF's hotheaded member. Cover to *The Human Torch* #1 (Sept. 1974) by Sal Buscema and John Romita, Sr.

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TWIN TORCH TRYOUTS IN 1974

In 1972, the series *Marvel Team-Up* debuted, its format usually teaming Spider-Man with other Marvel Universe characters in one-and-done stories. The FF's Human Torch was the first character to appear alongside the Web-Slinger, co-starring with Spidey in *MTU* #1 (Mar. 1972) through #3 (July 1972).

After appearing in the first three issues, it became clear that the Torch was not the regular co-star, as *MTU* would continue to focus on Spider-Man with issue #4 on, leaving the Human Torch out in the cold ... until issue #18 (Feb. 1974), that is, when the Human Torch teamed up with the Incredible Hulk to take on Blastaar.

When asked about the motivation for giving Human Torch the go-ahead as the lead in *Marvel Team-Up*, Roy Thomas says, "Not sure, but I have the feeling Stan worried about over-exposing Spider-Man, and he wanted to see if he could make more of a star out of the Torch." This was Stan Lee's next attempt to see if the Human Torch could run with the torch of his own series, allowing Spidey a much-needed rest. This experiment in *Marvel Team-Up* would continue off and on for a couple of years. The Human Torch would go on to team with Iceman (#23), Thor (#26), Iron Man (#29), the Son of Satan (#32), and Dr. Strange (#35).

Also in 1974, Marvel reprinted the first eight of Johnny Storm's *Strange Tales* solo stories in a series titled *The Human Torch*, starting with a first issue cover-dated Sept. 1974. These reprint books, along with the Torch's

occasional appearances in *Marvel Team-Up*, served to test the waters for a new solo series as well as introduce a new generation of readers to the earlier work of Lee and Kirby. Since the *Strange Tales* Torch stories were not full-length comics, supplemental material was needed to meet the page count. Since it had been established that Johnny Storm was a fan of comic books and of the Golden Age Human Torch, Roy Thomas, editor of the reprint series, tells *BACK ISSUE* that he came up with the idea to fill out each *Human Torch* issue with Golden Age Human Torch reprints. This may have just been an attempt to fill pages, but it did provide an interesting way for the reader to build a connection to young Mr. Storm. One could read his adventures, then read the stories that inspired him.

This bimonthly *Human Torch* reprint book failed to ignite fan interest and was canceled with issue #8 (Nov. 1975). In looking at the reasons why *Human Torch* failed, Roy Thomas offers, "I think there are a couple of reasons. Perhaps the most important is that, in the Marvel Age, it was characters with great physical power who succeeded the most strongly ... the Fantastic Four (with the Thing as the powerhouse), the Hulk (after a slow start), Iron Man, Thor. The Human Torch's power over fire worked well in a group, but didn't excite '60s kids as it had those in the '40s. And I don't think, somehow, that he ever established enough of an identity beyond the FF book. The Torch series [in *Strange Tales*] just always seemed like side-adventures to the main event. Perhaps an approach

Combustible Co-Star

(left) Splash page to *Marvel Team-Up* #24 (Sept. 1974), teaming the Human Torch and Dr. Strange. Signed by penciler Sal Buscema. Courtesy of Anthony Snyder (www.anthonyscomic-bookart.com). (right) Ron Wilson/Frank Giacoia original cover art to *Human Torch* #3 (Jan. 1975), courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

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The Fantastic Four and Other Things



It's Your Thing

(left) A publicity cel for the 1979 *Fred and Barney Meet the Thing* cartoon. According to Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com), this cel originally came from the collection of an unnamed former Hanna-Barbera executive. (below) Title card from 1967's *Fantastic Four* cartoon.

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A TELEVISION HISTORY

by *Stuart Fischer*



The Fantastic Four in Color

The Fantastic Four is Marvel's oldest continuing comic book (despite its reboots during recent years).

In 1961, when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby brought this terrific team into the American popular culture, little did anybody ever guess how significant this comic book would become, not only in the comics medium, but beyond.

Just six years after *The Fantastic Four* was introduced to the world as a comic book, it became the basis for a Saturday morning television weekly cartoon series, airing on ABC-TV and produced by Hanna-Barbera Productions.

The story of how this comic book became a television show is nothing short of ... fantastic.

ANIMATED FF 1967

In the fall of 1966, Sy Fischer, a television agent who at the time worked at the powerful Ashley Famous Agency (which would later merge with another large agency to form what is known today as International Creative Management—ICM, for short), noticed his son, Stuart (the author of this article), reading a *Fantastic Four* comic book.

Hanna-Barbera, who was Sy Fischer's client, was in the business of selling and making shows for the youth audience and became a goliath in that field by giving the world *The Flintstones*, *Huckleberry Hound*, *Yogi Bear*, *The Adventures of Jonny Quest*, and many others,

and who would also look at other properties created by anybody who had a good idea for future television use.

Sy Fischer, whose job it was to sell shows on behalf of his clients, Hanna-Barbera being one of them, saw potential in the *Fantastic Four* when he asked his son if he thought that this comic book could be a good cartoon.

Naturally, his son said, "Yes!" very enthusiastically, and the wheels at that point began to turn.

The very next day, the senior Fischer got on the phone with Joseph Barbera, the co-founder and head of Hanna-Barbera and told him of this wonderful comic book published by Marvel Comics and recommended that Hanna-Barbera get the rights to develop it for Saturday morning.

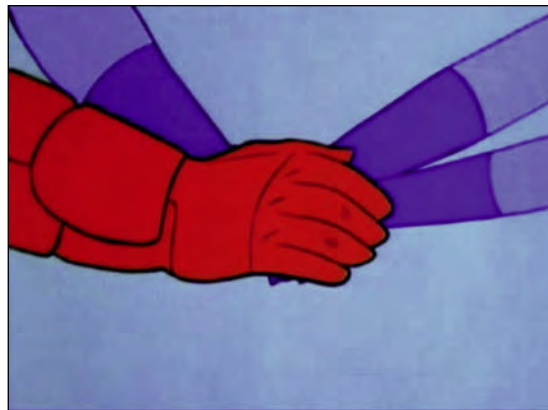
Barbera then took a look at the FF and agreed with both his agent and his agent's son that this super-team could be a good show, and that it ought to be pitched to the networks as a weekly animated program.

Both Joe Barbera and Sy Fischer then contacted Stan Lee and asked if the rights were available, and luckily enough, they were.

A deal was quickly made between the two companies and Hanna-Barbera put the show into development and then pitched to ABC, and quickly, it was on the ABC Saturday morning schedule for the Fall of 1967.

Marvel at this time was emerging as a solid force to observe. They already were selling a lot of comics, and the year before had a show

Mr. Fantastic
 (top) Television agent Sy Fischer, in his New York City office at 1 East 57 Street, helped bring *Fantastic Four* to Hanna-Barbera in 1967. Photo courtesy of Stuart Fischer. (middle) Screen capture from the 1967 cartoon. (bottom left) Animation cels of three of the four FF members. (bottom right) Sound-effect cels from the show. All courtesy of Heritage.



that was done by Krantz Films called *The Marvel Super Heroes*, made for the first-run syndication market (off-network, for local TV stations). It consisted of five different shows under one umbrella, each shown on a certain day during the week: *Captain America* (on Monday); *The Incredible Hulk* (on Tuesday); *Iron Man* (on Wednesday); *The Mighty Thor* (on Thursday); and *The Sub-Mariner* (on Friday). [Editor's note: Their theme songs are perhaps more legendary than the shows themselves.] Marvel was also beginning to merchandise their characters at this time, and was being taken seriously as a source of entertainment beyond the comic-book page.

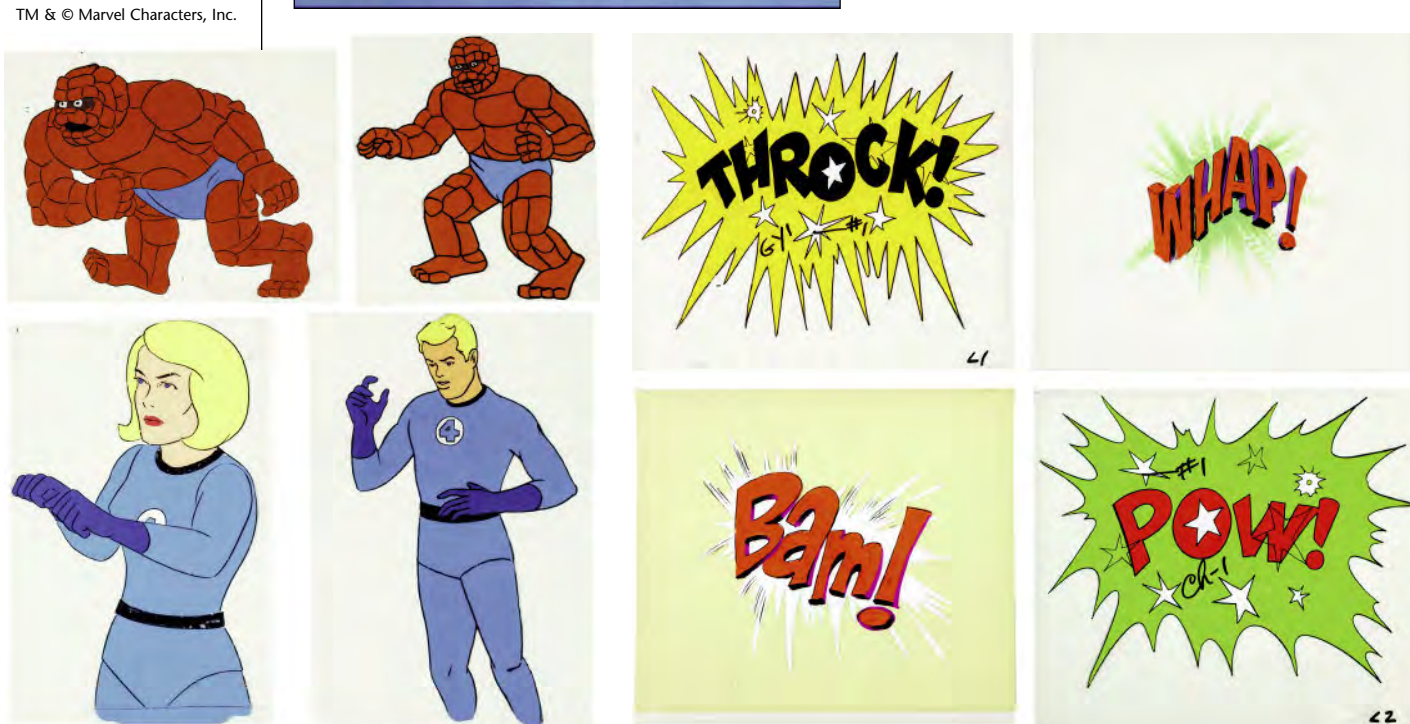
Marvel had a very good year in 1967: the syndicated cartoon was still going, and it introduced two shows on network Saturday morning television: *The Fantastic Four*, done by Hanna-Barbera, and *Spider-Man*, done by Krantz Films. *Fantastic Four* began one half-hour before *Spider-Man*, debuting on September 9, 1967 at 9:30 in the morning, with *Spider-Man* following at 10:00 A.M.

Fantastic Four was expertly done and very loyal to the comic book at the time. Hanna-Barbera and ABC retained Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as consultants. Designing the show was Alex Toth, an artist involved in both animation and comics. His work was well received by both professionals and fans, doing the Fabulous Foursome justice on the small screen.

Characters and stories from the comics were used in the show, including the Super-Skrull, Klaw, and the Mole Man, as well as a few original characters and stories created by Hanna-Barbera.

FF's voice actors were Gerald Mohr as Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic; JoAnn Pflug as Sue Storm/the Invisible Girl (Pflug was a successful actress who has done primetime television and made-for-television movies); Jack Flounders as Johnny Storm/the Human Torch; and Paul Frees as Ben Grimm/the Thing (Frees was of the animation industry's finest voice actors, having worked mostly for Jay Ward Productions on *Bullwinkle* as well as shows done by Filmation, Walter Lantz Studios, and Disney).

Fantastic Four ran on ABC until March 15, 1970.



Marvel Comics on the Air

by Dewey Cassell



Dial FF for Fantastic Four

Album cover for an LP (that's "Long-Playing record" for those born in the post-vinyl era) containing episodes of *The Adventures of the Fantastic Four*—a.k.a. *The Fantastic Four Radio Show*. Scan courtesy of Peter B. Lewis.

Fantastic Four TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

The Marvel Comics Radio Series

The mid-1970s was a time of expanding horizons for Marvel Comics. In 1973, Marvel launched an in-house fan club called FOOM (Friends of Ol' Marvel). In 1974, Marvel introduced a series of trade paperbacks published by Fireside, beginning with *Origins of Marvel Comics*. In 1975, Marvel hosted its own comic-book convention at the Hotel Commodore in New York City. And that same year, seeking to reach a new audience, Marvel took advantage of the latest in "modern" technology—radio.

The notion of cartoon characters on radio was not new. One of the best examples would be *Dick Tracy*, which began as a comic strip in 1931 and was adapted for radio beginning in 1934. The *Dick Tracy* episodes were 15 minutes in length (or 30 in later years) and ran until 1948. Terry and the Pirates enjoyed a similar successful run. Numerous pulp characters were also adapted to radio, including *The Shadow*. And the *Adventures of Superman* radio series began in 1940 and ran 11 years. Common to them all was strong sponsorship.

Audio dramatization of comic books was also not new. In fact, in 1974, Power Records had begun producing "Book and Record Sets" that featured popular Marvel comics, including the *Fantastic Four*, accompanied by seven-inch vinyl records.

The *Fantastic Four Radio Show* debuted in the fall of 1975. Not many people remember the show, much less that it was originally envisioned as the first part of a *Marvel Comics Radio Series*, but there were several noteworthy aspects of the program, particularly the cast, which included a 25-year-old future star of the television show, *Saturday Night Live*, as well as Marvel's own Stan Lee. As was the case with many radio shows, the main cast voiced leads and supporting characters, which included Ant-Man, the Sub-Mariner, and the Hulk. The storylines for the shows, originally each five minutes in length, were adapted from early *Fantastic Four* comic books.

The *Marvel Comics Radio Series* was the brainchild of Richard Clorfene and Peter B. Lewis. Lewis had worked at several West Coast radio stations prior to moving to New York in 1964. Clorfene moved to New York after serving as head creative writer and producer at Mel Blanc and Associates in Los Angeles. Clorfene and Lewis met while working on a pilot for a radio drama series called *Tales of the Energy*. What follows are excerpts from an interview with Peter B. Lewis by Sean Kleefeld on December 16, 1999.

— Dewey Cassell

SEAN KLEEFELD: *As I understand it, the original idea came from Richard Clorfene and the two of you were able to take the idea to Stan Lee. How did you pitch the idea?*

PETER B. LEWIS: Richard was really into Silver Surfer and wanted to do it as a radio series. Experienced the Silver Surfer cult in Southern California and knew it would be popular with them. We talked about it (and millions of other possibilities) through the production of the pilot.

In my day gig, I was a jingle engineer/mixer at a popular New York City studio, National Recording. Suddenly, through some light conversation and what you'd only call a Coincidence of God, I found myself talking with the wife of a songwriter who was working as a jingle singer on a gig I was doing. The wife, Ann Robinson, was in charge of licenses at Marvel Comics Group. She (and her hubby, singer/songwriter Tommy West) had heard and loved the *Tales of the Energy* pilot, she really loved the idea of the *Marvel Comics Radio Series*, and she could grant me necessary license. She could also deliver Stan Lee.

Another part of my day gig was working at 21st Century Communications, producers of the *National Lampoon Radio Hour*. It's really the precursor to *Saturday Night Live*. I got to hang out with the cast and crew of the *Lampoon*, and got to know the guy who put together the group of stations on which *National Lampoon Radio Hour* was distributed, Bob Michaelson. Since the *Lampoon* show was kinda winding down, Bob thought the Marvel show would be a good product to cycle into his network of stations.

We both thought getting an advertiser would be easy with a demo, [so] I wrote a demo. A dear friend of my family, a great and famous voice talent and [then] the boss of my girlfriend (now wife of 30 years), was Bob Maxwell. I called Bob up, told him the idea and what I needed, that I wanted to do this ensemble style, where we have the FF and a villain, five principles, able to do a couple voices each, at least. I considered having the villains played by "guest stars." He suggested Jerry Terheyden because he is so versatile. Jerry is a great team player, too. I thought we only needed him for about half of the time but he was at every minute of every session, because it was such fun for him!

I wanted to have a *National Lampoon* flavor to the sound, but I didn't want it to sound too much like the *Lampoon*. We recorded in

their studio at 21st Century, I used their offices to do the editing of the dialogue, I dubbed dozens of sounds from their effects library. I thought Bill Murray would do great as Johnny Storm. Bob Michaelson is the one who actually made the contact and signed him up. He was the most versatile of the *Lampoon* cast. He agreed to work for scale.

We needed a cast for the demo and Maxwell was the guy who knew who could do what. He knew Cynthia Adler, Terheyden, and Jim Pappas. Pappas had some experience, you saw him kinda doing himself in commercials. I was unsure until I heard him do the transformation from Ben Grimm to the Thing. He really understood how to make that change. A very tough thing to do live.

KLEEFELD: *Why did you start with the FF?*

LEWIS: Really, I guess it was my decision. I agreed with Richard [Clorfene] that Silver Surfer would be great. In retrospect, we maybe should have done that... For me, I truly believed this would be successful from the get-go.

We would lay the same foundation Stan laid when he started out: characters with "feet of clay" and amazing powers. The foundation, our test-ground if you will, would be the FF. After 13 weeks we'd get on to the Silver Surfer. It gave Richard time to recoup, get energized by the success of the project, and get to writing on the Silver Surfer. We'd also have the much-needed funding—we always thought we'd have a national advertiser. What a mistake.

Well, anyway, I was basically on my own with the thing, Marvel was ready to grant a license, I had a cast, a studio, access to the Marvel library and Xerox copies of anything I wanted. For the demo, I picked the section in issue one where they take the space ship and get hit by the cosmic rays, crash, and learn of their powers. It's good exposition and demonstrates the idea pretty well. It also ran about five minutes.

I never met Stan until we did the first session. I never really pitched anyone. Ann Robinson liked me, liked the idea, talked to Stan, and he must have liked the idea—she got him to agree to be the narrator! I didn't know anything about Marvel, or Stan Lee, or the comic-book biz, or any of that stuff. I don't think it is the kind of thing Marvel would do on their own. If we hadn't brought this to them, it never would have been considered. We got rights to about a dozen characters (including Silver Surfer, of course), just to be on the safe side.



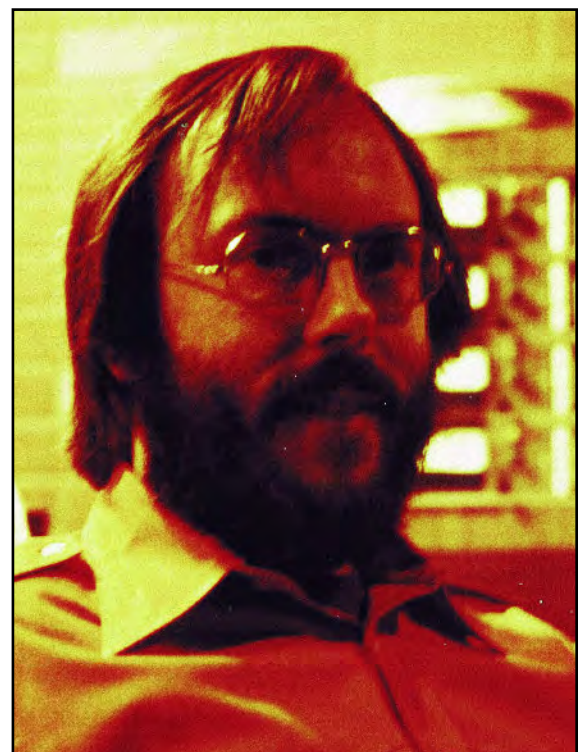
BILL MURRAY

Fantastic 45 RPM

(left) The precursor to *The Fantastic Four Radio Show*, the 1974 FF Book and Record Set from Power Records.

(right) Peter B. Lewis, one of the creators of *The Fantastic Four Radio Show*, in 1978. Courtesy of Mr. Lewis.

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THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN



"At last the Fantastic Four meet a foe whose power is even greater than theirs! Here is: IMPOSSIBLE MAN."

by **Andy Smith**

He was never supposed to come back.

His first appearance, in the pages of *Fantastic Four* #11 (Feb. 1963, inset), would seemingly seal his fate as the comics medium pressed on.

Even from the start, the zaniness of this nameless alien from "the planet Poppup in the Tenth Galaxy" is qualified with editor notes and character commentary. In fact, the story's fifth panel carries such a warning for readers:

"Editor's Note: By now, you're probably thinking that Stan and Jack have flipped their lids! But wait—things may even get wackier!"

Yet, the story continues.

"The Impossible Man," as dubbed by the Thing, proceeds to terrorize the Fantastic Four and citizens of Earth with lighthearted fare. A signature "POP" would denote a transformation into a giant buzzsaw, a movie monster, or a piece of cake. Even by Silver Age standards, it was a goofy—and admittedly humorous—tale of a bored alien with all of the power in the universe. He tries to make friends through transformations and pop-culture references, but his presence brought destruction. In the end, the team simply had to ignore him to make him go away.

And his debut was not met with overwhelming praise. In fact, the term "hate mail" is often used to describe his reception. His creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, moved on to a popular tale guest-starring the Hulk, and the little green man was barred from further use as the Silver Age continued.

Perhaps the pest-like nature of the character was realized too fully, as some fans had a similar reaction as the Fantastic Four did. They wanted him to go away. And he did.

But the Impossible Man, quite appropriately, did the impossible. He came back—13 years later.

You can blame that on Roy Thomas.

"IMPROBABLE AS IT MAY SEEM—THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN IS BACK IN TOWN!"

"I really liked the first story when it came out in *Fantastic Four* #11," Thomas tells *BACK*

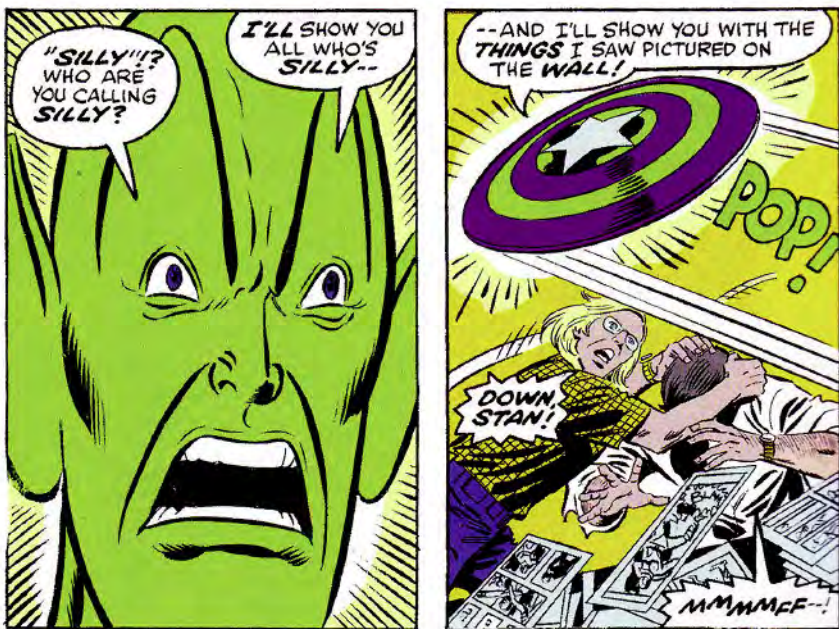
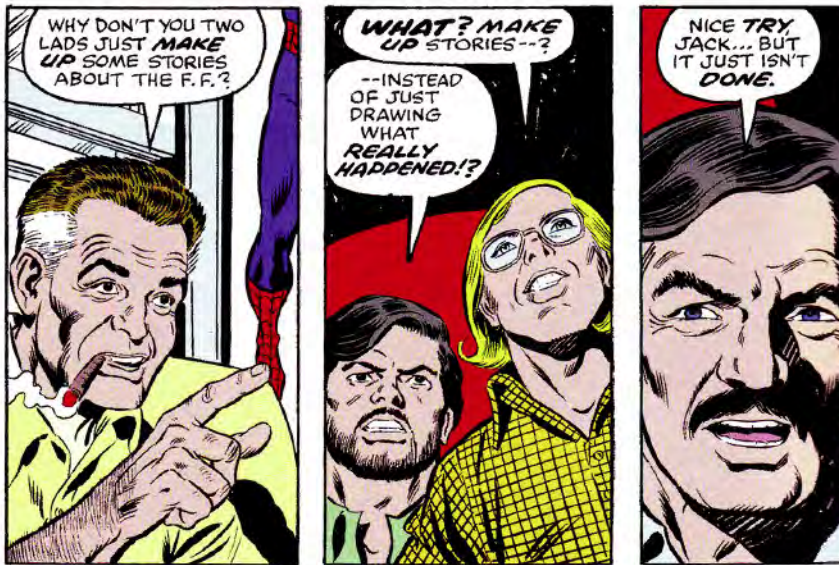
ISSUE. "The younger readers in particular disliked it, so much so that when I came to work there, somewhere along the line, when I talked to Stan about it, he



Improbable Return

Writer Roy Thomas did the impossible, the unthinkable, in *Fantastic Four* #176 (Nov. 1976) by reviving the Impossible Man. Cover art by Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott.

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Tour de Farce

Panels from *FF* #176.

Among the issue's cameos are (top, left to right) Jack Kirby, George Pérez, Roy Thomas, and Stan Lee. (bottom) Impy decides he wants to be a comic-book star!

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wouldn't let me or anyone else, for a number of years, use the Impossible Man in another story."

Thomas had arrived at Marvel in 1965, two years after Impossible Man's sole issue, upon taking the company's infamous and short-lived "script test." His first gig, as staff writer, led to a growing résumé of works that show Marvel's diversity in those days—including the genres of romance, fantasy, war, and, yes, superheroes. After further imprinting his name in the Marvel lexicon, tackling larger-scale books and characters, in 1972 he found himself in the position of the company's second editor-in-chief.

Simultaneously, he took over writing duties for *Fantastic Four*, the so-called "World's Greatest Comics Magazine." His run was marked by dramatic bouts and the team's continued evolution as a family. Over 50 issues into his run, he decided to try something different. He wanted to bring back this silly alien that many had forgotten from the previous decade.

And with that, the Impossible Man made his Bronze Age debut well after *Fantastic Four* hit the three-digit mark in its run, in #176 (Nov. 1976). Though interiors were done by a then-young and new artist in George

Pérez, who would go on to reach comics stardom, the cover had a different, yet familiar look to it.

"[Impossible Man's] second story was the one I did with George Pérez," Thomas says. "Until then, Stan wouldn't allow the character to be used by anybody, but eventually, I not only got to use the character in *The Fantastic Four*, the book where he was first introduced, I even managed to get Jack Kirby to draw the cover, which I was very proud of. In fact, he drew it while the story was [in production], so a couple of things he put on the cover, like Impossible Man having pieces of the Marvel heroes on him, was done in time that [Pérez] actually worked some of that into the story.

"I'm very proud to be first to manage to bring Impossible Man back."

The cover, now the iconic image used for collections featuring Impy (his affectionate nickname in later issues) and webpages devoted to him, features the alien wreaking havoc upon the foursome. And it shows Impossible Man's knack for multitasking, as his makeshift Iron Man glove blasts Human Torch in the face while landing a whack on the Thing's face with Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, taking the place of his left hand. Sure, it's doubtful that the alien would be worthy to pick up the hammer of the God of Thunder, but this is Impossible Man, after all.

Before Impossible Man would return to his extraordinarily crude ways, Thomas would make him into a hero. It was Impy, after all, who would lead the Devourer of Worlds to his home planet to save Earthlings. It worked, too, even giving Galactus a terrible "case o' terminal indigestion," as the Thing would describe it so eloquently. Now, Impossible Man was the sole survivor, though the hive nature of his people implied the least consequential version of alien genocide.

Despite the bold move, he quickly returned to his annoying ways as he set up shop on Earth.

It was this issue, Impy's first of several Bronze Age appearances, that Thomas and Pérez began a tradition that served as a callback to the 1960s. It was the first of many appearances in which Impy would visit Marvel. "The *Fantastic Four* pretty much behaved as the *Fantastic Four* would behave [in that issue]. The one thing that we allowed ourselves was to bring Stan and Jack in as guest stars into the story for a couple pages, and, in fact, the Marvel office [staff]. There's always been that tradition in comics since the early days, that Marvel was doing a comic about the *Fantastic Four*."

Impossible Man, in his typical bored fashion, heads over a couple streets from the previous scene. His head, now rendered as a balloon, is seen spying into the company's fifth-floor window at 575 Madison Avenue. A conversation is taking place between Kirby, Lee, Pérez, and Thomas.

"Stan? What is a 'Stan'?" Impy humorously ponders.

He quickly becomes infatuated with the concept of comic books, and after barging into the building, demands that they make an Impossible Man solo series. Stan recognizes Impy, saying that "a lot of our readers didn't like that issue, because he looked too silly." His refusal is not met well.

Stan, the character, ends up going back on his word, making one more joke about "silly-looking characters" with a framed photo of Howard the Duck behind him. The real-life Lee, as well as fans, had actually come around to the character's presence.

Stan Lee "never complained about it afterwards," Thomas says. "I don't recall us getting a lot of angry mail that time. By then, comics readers kind of grew up



The first mention of Galactus comes from the mouth of a Skrull space commander as his crew encounters the Silver Surfer in deep space (*The Fantastic Four* #48, Mar. 1966): “It is not merely him, you fool!! Have you not studied your cosmic history? Wherever he appears, it is certain that Galactus cannot be very far behind!” From that introduction, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby boldly set up a universal presence for this new cosmic character, harvesting a sense of fear and grandeur.

The story of Galactus isn't your typical “Bring on the Bad Guys” article. Galactus rises above the archetypal definition of a villain, as he can't be pinned down as evil. Galactus acts as a dynamic force that compels protagonists to reevaluate their place in the universe, putting perspective on their goals and their existence. Through this mysterious and complex character, creators for decades have explored the vast cosmic unknown and populated it with their own ideas and constructs.

THE GALACTUS TRILOGY

In the classic Galactus Trilogy (*Fantastic Four* #48–50, Mar.–May 1966), the Silver Surfer leads his master to Earth, despite the efforts of the usually passive and stoic Watcher. Lee and Kirby took the “World's Greatest Comic Magazine” to a new level—our heroes had repelled alien invasions and defeated every Earth-based threat, but now they faced a new cosmic antagonist that would put them in their place.

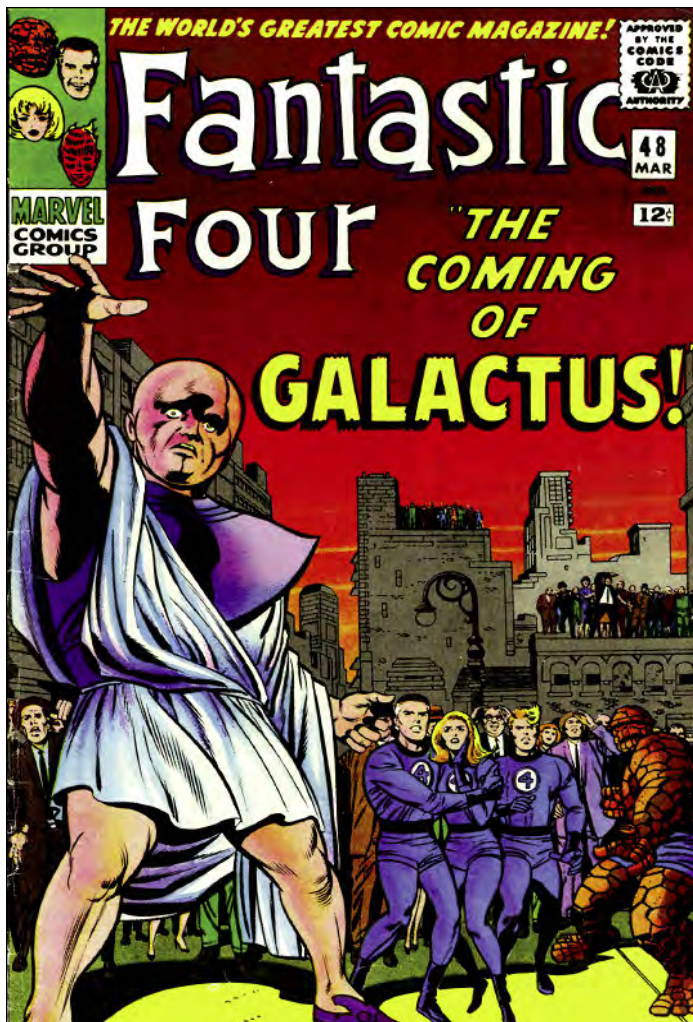
From his conception, Galactus was meant to be more than just another villain. Lee wanted a character who broke their supervillain mold. “We didn't want to use the tired old cliché about him wanting to conquer the world,” recalled Stan Lee in his introduction to *Marvel Masterworks* vol. 25 (Oct. 1993). “There were enough would-be world conquerors in the Marvel Universe and in all the other comic-book galaxies. That was when inspiration struck. Why not have him *not* be a really evil person? After all, a demi-god should be beyond mere good and evil. He'd just be (don't laugh!) hungry. And the nourishment he'd require is the life force and energy from living planets!”

Galactus arrives in dramatic fashion and doesn't acknowledge the existence of our heroes, but instead confronts Uatu the Watcher, who he treats as an equal. Uatu, who has been assigned by his advanced race to observe the Earth, argues that Galactus should spare the Earth because of the potential of humankind. Galactus isn't moved by the Watcher's pleas: “It is not my intention to injure any living being! But ... I must replenish my

Not Your Routine Rogue

We salute the Jack Kirby/George Klein cover of *The Mighty Thor* #169 (Oct. 1969) with a montage of Galactus cover appearances.

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Silver Age Classics

(left) *Fantastic Four* #48 (Mar. 1966) rocked the world.

(right) Galactus' reach extended outside of the FF—including this appearance in *Thor* #168 (Sept. 1969).

Covers by Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott.

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energy! If petty creatures are wiped out when I drain a planet, it is regrettable ... but unavoidable!"

While Galactus may be removed from human emotions, his faithful herald proves to be his conscience. The Silver Surfer learns firsthand about humanity through the blind sculptress, Alicia Masters. In *Fantastic Four* #50 (May 1966), the Surfer has an epiphany and takes up humanity's cause against his master. So strong are his newfound convictions, the Silver Surfer attacks Galactus, ever knowing that even his cosmic might is nothing compared to that of his creator.

With the help of the Watcher and the Silver Surfer, the Fantastic Four and Earth meet Galactus' challenge and earn their continued existence. While it may have been a bluff, Reed Richards was prepared to sacrifice himself to destroy Galactus by using the Ultimate Nullifier. Before leaving, Galactus strikes down his former herald and binds the Silver Surfer to the Earth.

"And for some reason I went to the Bible and I came up with Galactus," revealed Jack Kirby during an interview for *The Masters of the Comic Book Art* documentary in 1987. "And there I was, in front of this tremendous figure, who I knew very well because I've always felt him, and I certainly couldn't treat him in the same way that I would any ordinary mortal. And I remember in my first story, I had to back away from him to resolve that story. And, of course, the Silver Surfer is a fallen angel, and when Galactus relegated him to Earth, he stayed on Earth. And that was the beginning of his adventures. And they were figures that had never before been

used in comics. They were above mythic figures. And, of course, they were the first gods."

It's difficult not to see biblical themes that are leveraged in the relationship between Galactus and the Silver Surfer. The Silver Surfer is the fallen angel who was willing to defy his god's desires. For his insolence, Galactus punishes the Surfer in a similar way to Lucifer being cast out and denied re-entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. And keeping with the biblical themes, the Watcher plays the satanic figure with his offer of knowledge with the Ultimate Nullifier, which parallels the apple from the garden Eden. You can also see the Watcher's role as a modern-day Prometheus, bringing cosmic knowledge to the Marvel heroes, like Prometheus brought fire down from Olympus.

GALACTUS: THE ORIGIN

Concerned of the potential threat that Galactus may one day pose to Asgard, the All-Father Odin in *The Mighty Thor* #167 (Aug. 1969) dispatches Thor to gather more information. Galactus welcomes the audience with Thor and they have a cordial sit-down where Galactus explains that he isn't a direct threat. Galactus relates his origin and his primordial need to feed off of the energies of living worlds.

At first, this Lee and Kirby origin seems similar to the origin of Superman, instead with a scientist named Galen who has realized that their civilization is doomed. However, it's not just the world of Taa, but the universe itself that is dying. Galen departs with a

Heralds Two

Courtesy of Heritage, original cover art by Marshall Rogers, inked and signed by Joe Rubinstein, for the first issue of writer Steve Englehart's *Silver Surfer* series. (inset) Cover to issue #1 (July 1987), in color.

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his hunger! You can end his ceaseless, monstrous craving for the very essence of living worlds—let it be done! I will not wait! I will not let some petty charade delay my respite! The torment must end now!"

Galactus' goal isn't to defeat or attack the Beyonder, but rather to demand that the Beyonder free him of his cosmic burden. Shooter's perspective adds a tragic flare to the Galactus' character as he struggles with a torturous existence. But the Beyonder proves to be more powerful than Galactus and swats him aside like an annoying insect. While Galactus didn't really fit into the *Secret Wars*' theme of good versus evil, he serves as a means to calibrate the power levels of the Beyonder.

"And why Galactus? He doesn't fit! Human beings and even gods may be tempted, but Galactus is a force of nature—no more capable of having enemies than a hurricane or an earthquake!" asks Reed

Richards in *Secret Wars* #9 (Jan. 1985). Galactus recovers from his defeat at the hands of the Beyonder and is unwavering in his determination to confront the Beyonder again.

After an audience with Galactus, Reed returns to the heroes to convince them that Galactus should be allowed to devour the planet. He argues that if the Beyonder does honor the rewards of a victory in his game, it would be for the greater good. Shooter's interpretation of Galactus' greatest desire was that he longs to be free of the destructive hunger that compels him to devour worlds. Fulfilling that desire would save countless planets and lives. What becomes evident in Shooter's take on Galactus is that he is being rather selfish and perhaps all too human, putting his needs before the larger needs of the universe. If he could be purged of his need to devour planets, it would jeopardize his cosmic role. Perhaps we can look at this event as a momentary lapse of judgment or weakness, where Galactus sees an opportunity to bypass a rather challenging cosmic destiny.



MARSHALL ROGERS

Photo by Tenebrae at English Wikipedia.

However, the heroes aren't swayed by Reed's logic and continue to fight. The heroes successfully defend the planet and drive off Galactus. He returns to his homeworld spacecraft Taa II and consumes it. But before he can absorb that energy, Dr. Doom siphons his powers and uses it to temporarily defeat the Beyonder. As the limited series concludes with the Beyonder being restored to power, there's no closure in terms of what happens to Galactus. The consequences of this event expanded the cosmic-power levels of the Marvel Universe, created a power class beyond Galactus, and put a character perspective on Galactus that would be used by later creators.

ENGLEHART'S SILVER SURFER

"When I took over the *Silver Surfer*, the one thing I wanted to do was get him back into space, free, and after a few bumps in the road, Marvel let me do that. So I got to explore him when he wasn't whining about being trapped all the time," Englehart tells *BACK ISSUE* readers. "My *Silver Surfer* got to roam the spaceways and participate, or not participate, with the cosmic beings he encountered, as he chose. But it was always just under the surface

that Galactus made him and Galactus could unmake him at any time. Thus, the story where he stood up to Galactus was a watershed moment. The *Silver Surfer* might die, but the Surfer wouldn't whine any more."

In *The Silver Surfer* #9 (Mar. 1988), the Elders of the Universe set a plan into motion to use the six soul gems to destroy Galactus. By destroying Galactus, the Elders hope to destroy Death and Eternity and bring an end to the universe and ultimately end their eternal existence with which they had become disenchanted.

"Putting the *Silver Surfer* back into space gave me all of [Marvel] space to play with, and all inhabitants

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thereof," Englehart says. "The Elders of the Universe were fairly minor characters as individuals, but putting them together made for a rich and complex mix, and all together added up to something able to take on Galactus. I don't think I had any larger message; I was just playing with the pieces I'd gotten myself." The Elders of the Universe almost succeed, but the Silver Surfer and Nova rescue Galactus, and he then devours his enemies.

Englehart defines Galactus' place in the Marvel Universe in *Silver Surfer* #10 (Apr. 1988): "Galactus is the third force in reality. Between the entities called Death and Eternity. I exist to rectify their imbalances!" Galactus then has a discussion with Eternity, to whom he refers as "father" and takes the form of living sun to interact with him. "To me, Eternity brings Allness, and Death brings Nothingness—and Galactus is the being who transforms All to Nothing by consuming it," according to Englehart. "He's the link between Alpha and Omega, and just as important in the scheme of things because without a connection, the first two exist in complete solitude. Thus, a sun made sense for him, because suns consume themselves on the way to Nothingness."

The issue wraps up with a lingering plot thread that has Galactus suffering from a case of indigestion, unable to properly digest the Elders. That plot thread is picked up a few months later in *Silver Surfer* #16 (Oct. 1988), with Galactus dying because he was unable to digest the Elders he had devoured. He pleads for assistance from Reed and Susan Richards and the Silver Surfer. Their adventures bring them into contact with another paired set of cosmic beings, Chaos and Order. While Eternity and Death are the base forces of the Marvel core reality, Order and Chaos are a similar representation of another reality. While Chaos and Order are more naturally at odds, Eternity and Death are less confrontational. The Marvel core reality needs a force like Galactus to shake up that balance every once and awhile. Impressed by that trinity, Chaos and Order decide to create the being called the In-Betweener to escalate their own conflict.

Englehart, as many other writers, hints at Galactus having a greater purpose. But is that purpose so far removed from what we can understand that we shouldn't bother, or does that perhaps drive us to become something more?

"I enjoy thinking about stuff like that, so I'm all in favor of striving for something greater than we think we are," admits Englehart. "Galactus caused me to think and hopefully can cause others to do the same. But as for whether he gives a damn about that or us—I don't think he does. If he thought about the lives he was consuming, he'd go mad, so he doesn't consider us at all. It's like eating yogurt; there are millions of bacteria in there, and we could care less."

In *Silver Surfer* #17 (Nov. 1988), the In-Betweener describes himself as "I am everything, for I am nothing! I am a concept ... of concepts!" The undevoured Elders convince the In-Betweener to kill Galactus. In his weakened state, Galactus can't defend himself. However, the In-Betweener can't destroy Galactus, since Galactus is a unique being and there is no other cosmic force that is diametrically opposed to him. Chaos and Order intercede at the behest of the Silver Surfer and free Galactus of the indigestible Elders.

Silver Surfer #18 (Dec. 1988) features one of the more memorable cosmic slugfests of the 1980s, pitting Galactus against the In-Betweener. Englehart cleverly knew his teenaged audience wouldn't appreciate a fight on the metaphysical level of the reality in which



these beings exist. Instead, he had them engage in old-fashioned fisticuffs. "Those two are cosmic beings but they were in conflict," says Englehart. "Possibly everything we see of them is simply our interpretation of events we can't really comprehend. Based on his name, Galactus might actually be the galaxy."

Galactus is eager to rid this reality of the In-Betweener, as he represents a threat to Galactus' existence since he wanted to take Galactus' place. The threat of the In-Betweener was a challenge to Galactus' identity and his role in the universe. The In-Betweener proves to be a foe that can match Galactus on every level, and in the end became that diametric opposite that he himself had been looking for to defeat Galactus. The faithfulness of his herald Nova helps turn the tide of their battle, and the In-Betweener is sent back to his reality and into the hands of Chaos and Order.

Englehart recalls, "The first Marvel comic I ever bought was *The Fantastic Four* #49, right in the middle of the Galactus Saga as illustrated by Jack Kirby and Joe

A Legend Retold
Original art to Byrne's homage to the classic Silver Surfer/Galactus tale, produced as a pinup for the FF's 30th Anniversary issue, *Fantastic Four* #358 (Nov. 1991). Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions.

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A Time of Maturity and Change

THE FANTASTIC FOUR IN THE 1980s

FlashBack!

by Franck Martini



The names of the creators who worked on *The Fantastic Four* during this decade were enough to let you envision how great the 1980s were for Reed, Sue, Johnny, Ben, and the short-term members of the team: Wolfman, Byrne, Pollard, Englehart, Stern, Buscema (both!), and Sienkiewicz ... and Sinnott, of course—do you really need more as an intro?

Imagine entering a comic shop (or more likely a newsstand) in late 1979 and discovering the Marvel comics bearing a January 1980 cover date... Many of those issues feature storylines that are frequently featured in Top Ten lists: Tony Stark was recovering from his battle with alcoholism in *Iron Man* #130 (by Michelinie and Layton); *The Amazing Spider-Man* was celebrating its 200th issue (by Wolfman and Pollard), with Spidey settling an old score with the burglar who killed Uncle Ben; *Daredevil* had a fill-in issue by Steve Ditko (#162), but that was just a breather between two Miller/Janson issues; the Avengers were fighting the Grey Gargoyle in #191 (by Stern, Michelinie, and Byrne); the X-Men were about to fight for their lives against a new group of villains you may have heard of—the Hellfire Club—in issue #129 (by Claremont and Byrne); and Johnny Storm was the only remaining *living* member of the FF while Ben, Sue, and Reed lay dead of old age at his feet in *Fantastic Four* #214 (by Wolfman and Byrne—yes, Byrne *again*, providing art for the top three team books of Marvel that month!).

The early '80s showcase Marvel Comics at one of its finest periods ever, and a very large chunk of the decade would follow in the same vein. *Fantastic Four* follows this trend: classic stories, some of the best creators in the field, major turning points, epic sagas, romance, death, new characters—this decade had it all!

REFRESHED FOR THE '80s BY WOLFMAN

As it is frequently the case, the '80s do not really start in January 1980 for the FF. The real beginning of a new era of the *Fantastic Four* takes place 18 months before, as Marv Wolfman takes over the writing chores of the book. Simply put, it is a team book with a split team. And truth to be told, those splits were quite commonplace for the FF during the '70s. Departures from the team, power losses, new members, alternate versions of characters—it really felt like a lot of the '70s was spent deconstructing the classic vision of the *Fantastic Four*.

Such was the feeling for Wolfman: "As a fan, I was tired of seeing the FF split up time and again. It felt old in the been-there/done-that sort of way. So my idea

Dynamic Decade

While *Fantastic Four* was graced by numerous A-list creators during the 1980s, standing at the top of the heap was writer/artist John Byrne, who instituted change—while maintaining a "back to basics" approach. Cover to *FF's* 20th Anniversary issue, #236 (Nov. 1981), inked by Terry Austin.

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Wolfman Winds Down

Among Marv's contributions to the FF canon: (left) an aged FF in issue #214 (Jan. 1980, cover by John Byrne and Joe Sinnott) and (right) a crossover with *Spectacular Spider-Man* #42 in issue #218 (May 1980, cover art by Al Milgrom and Sinnott); the latter issue heralded the return of the original *Fantastic Four* logo.

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was to keep them together and just have adventures the way Stan and Jack had done."

Focusing on the "Stan and Jack way" would be a frequent motto throughout Wolfman's run. He would create epic storylines, with two major highlights, starting with the Dr. Doom story that spans from issue #195 to 200 (June–Nov. 1978). "I wanted to do a massive, emotional battle between them," he reveals. "As a fan, I hated the idea that every confrontation between hero and villain was indecisive. I wanted a real confrontation with a real climax and I wanted it to be personal and emotional." Then the team would be embarked in a major story involving the Skrulls, the Nova Corps (ending some plots leftover in the *Nova* book also written by Wolfman), and Galactus and the creation of his herald Terrax. Wolfman realized that "Galactus was using elemental characters as his heralds." The story finishes in the aforementioned issue #214 (Jan. 1980), where Ben, Sue, and Reed are all dying of old age as they were shot by an aging ray by Skrulls a few issues before. This issue is essentially a solo Torch story, as Johnny tries to find a way to reverse the effects of the gun and save his teammates. With the aid of a dying Reed, the Torch manages to save the day, albeit after a few pages of self-deprecation as he believes he has failed. It was

quite a new take on the Torch: "I forget why I wrote it like this, but I think it had to do with not using him that much in a positive way before," Marv says.

Wolfman's run concludes after a final two-parter involving a scientist turned into a god, the intervention of Blaastar, and quite an impressive display of power by Franklin Richards: "I definitely wanted Franklin's powers to be worrisome. In fiction, everything needs to be a dramatic problem until it's not."

This was a run that Marv Wolfman never really enjoyed: "I loved *The Fantastic Four*, but felt as a writer, except for issue #200, I never did the job on the title I wanted to. Stan and Jack had left huge footprints and I didn't feel that I filled them at all."

Amazingly, Wolfman is one of the rare writers who kept the classic roster throughout his run: "I think the FF works only when the main four are there and not when there

are substitutes," he said in *BACK ISSUE* #7 (Nov. 2004).

Issue #218 (May 1980) is a crossover issue with *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-Man*, and is notable because of the return of the classic FF logo—which would stay for the rest of the decade.

Following Marv Wolfman, an odd two-part inventory story written and drawn by John Byrne appeared in *FF* #220–221 (July–Aug. 1980). Recalled



MARV WOLFMAN





Byrne in Tom DeFalco's *Comics Creators on Fantastic Four* (Titan Books, 2004): "Ah, the Coca-Cola story! ... [Coke] wanted to use the FF [for a story they would distribute], so I came up with a self-contained, very innocuous kind of story. ... It was less than a double-sized issue, and when it was finished, Coca-Cola said it was too violent ... and they rejected it. [Editor] Jim Salicrup suggested we cut it in half, add a couple of pages, and turn it into two issues of *Fantastic Four*. They are the two dullest issues of the FF ever published."

A VISUAL SHAKE-UP WITH BILL SIENKIEWICZ

Doug Moench became the next FF writer, for a relatively short run on issues #219 (June 1980), and 222-231, plus one Annual (#15). It's quite a surprising run, and was appreciated by readers, according to the letters page. Sub-Mariner appears in the first issue (#219), then none of the "classic" FF foes will appear until after Moench's departure. "I was told to stay away from the established guys for at least a year," Moench reflected in *Comics Creators on Fantastic Four*. "I remember looking forward to using the classic villains, but I ended up leaving the book before I ever had a chance to use any of them."

Moench brings back the Salem Seven for a three-parter focusing on Franklin's powers (#221-223); the FF fight a Norse God crying tears of crimson, with a little help from a familiar God of Thunder (#224-225); they team up with the Shogun Warriors against a giant "mecha" (#226); fight against Body Snatchers-like creatures called the Brain Parasites in an horrific tale (#227); and the last three issues become more cosmic, as the FF are transported into

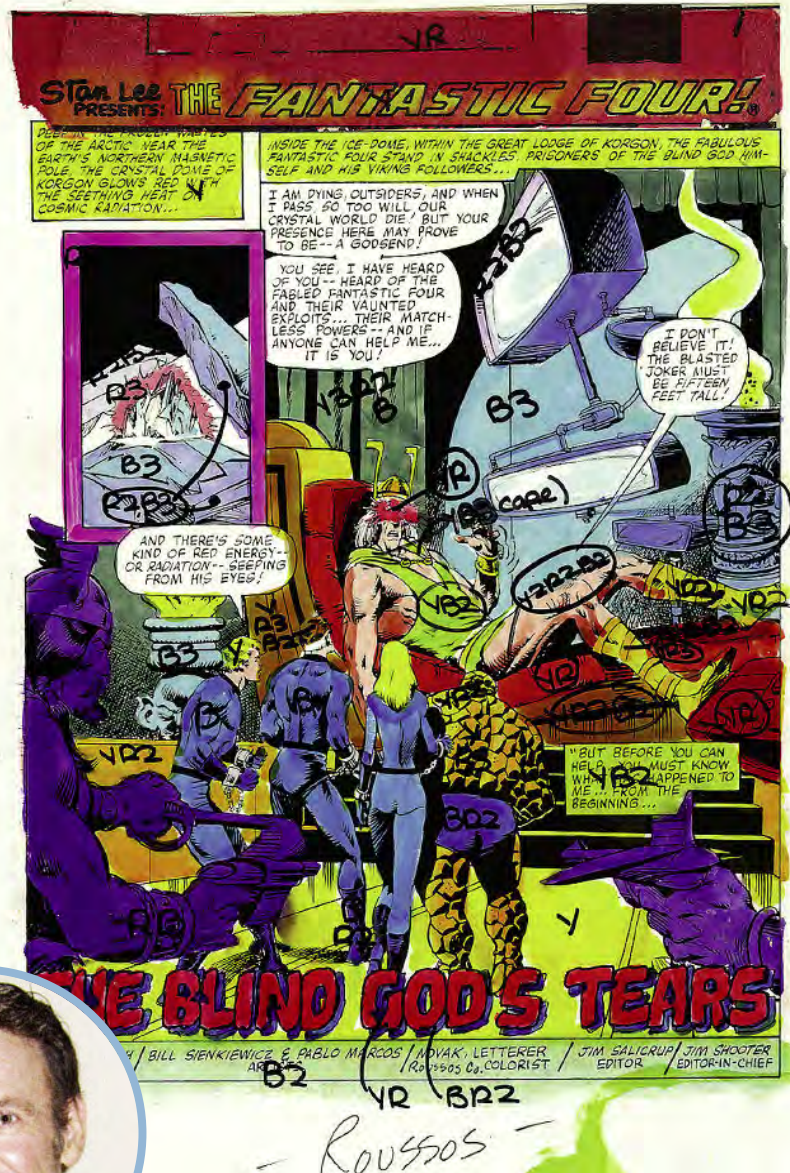


BILL SIENKIEWICZ

Photo by Luigin Novi.

the Negative Zone after fighting a living black hole (#228-231). Moench describes the FF as "a family unit under a lot of stress and constantly bickering, but they really love one another." What is striking about his run on FF is how much the family aspect of the book is emphasized. Just view how much Franklin Richards is used during those issues. He is involved in most of the stories and central in two of them (Salem Seven's and Shogun Warriors). It is quite a fresh approach on the character, and it definitely changes the tone of the book and the stories.

Visually, those issues are drawn by Bill Sienkiewicz and inked by regular Joe Sinnott and some guest inkers (Pablo Marcos, Bruce Patterson). Obviously, this talented artist had to bring his touch to *Fantastic Four*, albeit a style quite influenced by other artists at the time: "The Neal Adams influence was a major and most obvious aspect to my work," said Sienkiewicz in *The Jack Kirby Collector* #33 (Nov. 2001). "When I was asked to do the book, I turned



Franklin Under Siege

(left) Bill Sienkiewicz's startling cover to FF #222 (Sept. 1980); inked by Joe Sinnott. (right) Courtesy of Heritage, the George Roussos color guide to the splash page of #225, the issue featuring a Thor cameo.

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fit anywhere else. So I thought, 'Let's have Sue pregnant again and have her lose the baby, and I can have essentially the same emotional impact.'"

Tortured physically by Mephisto (#277, Apr. 1985) and then manipulated by Psycho-Man, an unhinged Susan snaps and goes "Dark Phoenix," becoming the evil creature Malice in #280 (July 1985). Fighting her teammates to a standstill, Sue is finally freed of her Malice persona after an intense exchange with Reed that contains a lot of dirty laundry and covers a lot of previously unspoken issues between the two.

A vengeful Sue leads the attack against Psycho-Man's micro world in *FF* #282-284 (Aug.-Oct. 1985), which is emotionally difficult for her. The final victory is a bitter one: The evolution of Sue concludes as she gives Psycho-Man a taste of his own medicine and changes her codename, deciding she is now to be called the *Invisible Woman*.

In 1985, Byrne said: "I'm inclined to think that she is the most powerful member of the group. Part of the whole scenario I did with the 'Dark Invisible Girl' story was to demonstrate how powerful Sue is. She has certain limitations because she's 'one of the good guys' and cannot utilize her power to its full content. ... By removing the barriers, by letting Malice (the Dark Sue character) cut loose with Sue's powerful force, I was able to demonstrate that this is a lady you don't mess around with."

Sue would also deal with the apparent death of Reed in Byrne's final issues with a lot of courage and strength, perhaps as proof of her new name and status.

Byrne writes Sue with a lot of subtlety during his six-year tenure, and at times his *Invisible Woman*

subplots (along with Johnny and Alicia's developing romance) can appear more appealing than the main stories in the book.

Byrne offered a later take on Sue's evolution in *Wizard Magazine* #47 (July 1995): "I used to adopt a character on each book. On *FF* it was Sue, far and away. She was such a cipher when I came on, and I wanted to find out what I could do with her without turning her into someone else."

(As a footnote, in 1987's post-Byrne *Fantastic Four* #300, an issue written by Roger Stern and drawn by John and Sal Buscema, Sue is out with She-Hulk and Alicia, shopping for the upcoming wedding of the Human Torch and Alicia. Meanwhile, Reed is at home playing with Franklin, who's riding his dad like a cowboy—mirroring the splash page of issue #222. That's a nice but simple example of how things have changed in the way Sue is depicted in a few years but also how Reed has grown into a more present father as well.)



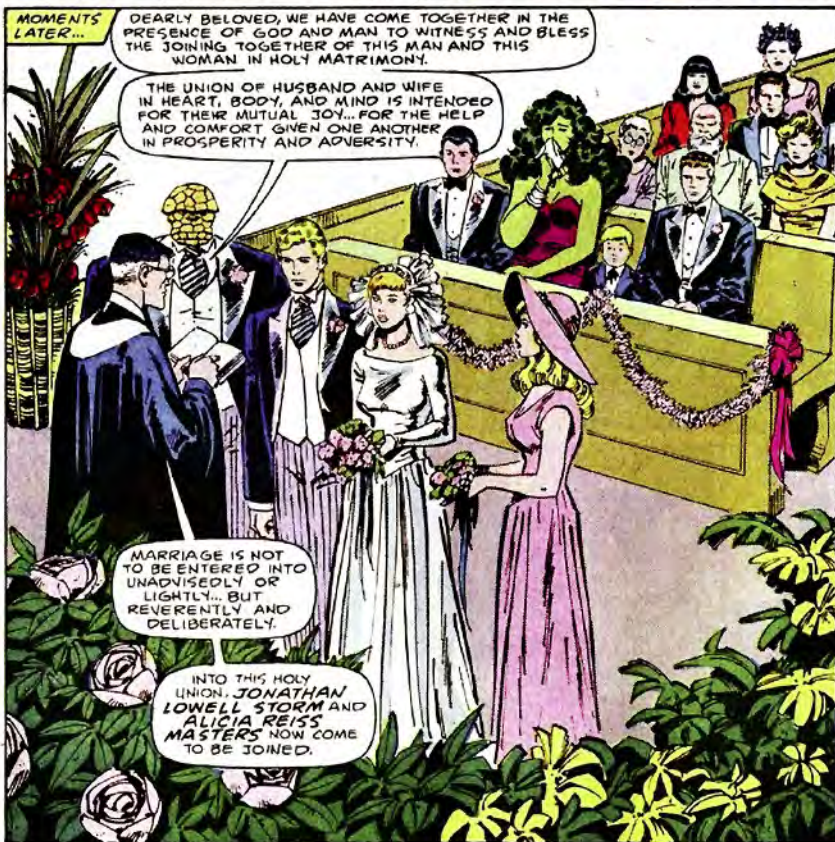
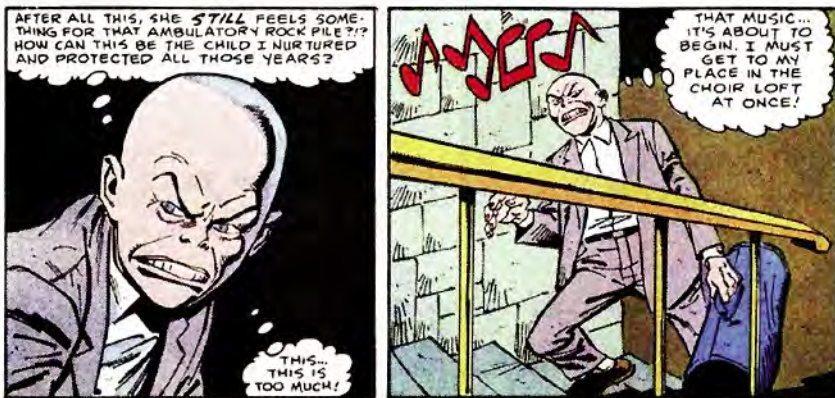
JOHN BYRNE

Malice Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Sue in her "Dark Invisible Woman" guise of Malice. Jerry Ordway inks Byrne on this original art page to #280 (July 1985, courtesy of Heritage) and the cover to #281.

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as it turned out.” In terms of writing, it was quite experimental, as Byrne recalled to *Comic Book Artist*: “I penciled the page completely and then ... tried to squeeze in the dialogue I had in my head. Like all new writers, I was verbose.” Artistically, he switched from full pencils to breakdowns. “It took me ten issues to find a comfortable inking style. The first time I was comfortable with the inks was my first major Galactus story [#243],” he admitted in *Wizard* #47.

The reasons of Byrne’s departure from *Fantastic Four* are numerous (office politics, his move to DC to take over *Superman*, his tumultuous relationship with Jim Shooter, a certain loss of interest) and vastly documented. Byrne would never return to *FF*, even though it was proposed to him twice: “I dislike setting myself up for comparison with my earlier work,” he said in an online chat in 1998.

Overall it was a labor of love, and perhaps more than that: “I plugged into the *FF* as I have no other book, my creations included. Perhaps it is the long fan association ... or the long professional association, but I knew those people as well as I know members of my own family. Everything else has been fun in its own way, but the *FF* was nearly a vocation.”

THE SHORT ROGER STERN STINT

Roger Stern has a lot in common with John Byrne. They are friends. They worked together—as editor/artist (*Uncanny X-Men*) and as writer/artist (*Captain America* and many more afterwards). And Stern would twice become the writer to follow Byrne on a title, first on *Fantastic Four*—starting in 1985 as scripter over Byrne’s plot in #294, then as writer in #295—and then two years later at DC on the *Superman* titles.

Stern starts by concluding Byrne’s story regarding a time-displaced Central City, where the first seeds of the upcoming departure of Sue and Reed are planted. The *FF* are considered as gods in Central City and their powers are copied by genetically altered warriors. Five

Alicia and Johnny, Sittin’ in a Tree...

Writer Roger Stern’s *FF* tenure was brief, but he rocked Ben’s world by marrying the Thing’s former girlfriend Alicia Masters and Johnny Storm in *Fantastic Four* #300 (Mar. 1987). Cover and interior page drawn by John and Sal Buscema.

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page 11, panels 1 and 2) and some less subtle ones (#254, page 6, panel 5, and page 10). Johnny and Alicia clearly seem to spend prenuptial nights together (#275, page 12, and #277, pages 6–9). There is innuendo around Wyatt and She-Hulk (starting with #270), and the paparazzi snapping risqué pictures of She-Hulk in #275 show her lack of inhibitions. Sexual references (especially for non-married people) were quite new at the time in a major mainstream book, and these situations were always nicely handled by Byrne.

So, what is Byrne’s opinion on mature themes? Right after writing #285 (Dec. 1985), he declared that “the morality of the stories I write has to be different from if I was writing for a different audience because we’re doing it for children. ... We can do death, miscarriages, drugs, abortion, and God knows what as long as we handle it properly. You don’t want to constantly lay the real world at a child’s feet.”

Finally, one of the major changes of this epic run is perhaps the way Byrne evolved artistically. As he said in *Modern Masters* vol. 7 (May 2006): “It became my first real, fulltime, me doing everything. Even inking,

years later, this might have been seen as a meta-message for some Image Comics characters, but here it's really just a fun story.

As part of Marvel's 25th Anniversary Month celebration, *Fantastic Four* #296 (Nov. 1986) features a special story plotted by Jim Shooter and scripted by Stan Lee, with art by a lot of people. [Editor's note: For more about Marvel's 25th Anniversary Month, see *BACK ISSUE* #69.] The long list of artists, inkers, and the involvement of Marvel's then-editor-in-chief may imply a bit of red tape. Jim Shooter said on his blog in 2011: "I don't think I ever wrote an issue of the FF. I plotted an anniversary. I did some rewriting on some botched scripts. And, being EIC, I frequently weighed in on the direction of the series." Issue #296 is a nice and well-written story by two top writers. In this issue, the Thing returns to the FF. It is also the last issue edited by Mike Carlin, who left Marvel and went to DC to edit John Byrne, Marv Wolfman, and Jerry Ordway on the *Superman* books.

With the classic roster now in place (and with She-Hulk still on board, meaning that we have five persons wearing FF costumes!), beginning with *Fantastic Four* #297 (Dec. 1986) a new artistic team joins regular writer Roger Stern on the book:

John Buscema as penciler and his brother Sal Buscema on inks—quite a pair! And the FF embark on a cosmic mission tailor-made for Big John: large fights, big warriors, explosions ... the art really shines on these first two issues. Stern follows Byrne's plots and dives deep into Ben Grimm. Emotionally, the Thing is at the heart of the stories and he is in a dark place. He wears a full costume and a helmet, since his looks scare Franklin and he doesn't wish to be seen. Ben contemplates suicide in #297 as he chooses to let himself wander in deep space. An intense conversation with Johnny follows, and Ben is rescued against his own will.

Issue #299 (Jan. 1987) is a great buddy story, once again with a strong focus on Ben Grimm. It is also a recap of all the major events the Thing has gone through over the years. She-Hulk and the Thing exchange drinks with Iron Man and the Thing starts to get things start to get in all, it's a great



ROGER STERN

is a nice done-in-1987). It contains anniversary issue: es, an impending doom. it after two years Franklin against the (Apr. 1987), which cia's honeymoon. *Fantastic Four*, as issue over Stern's plot,

is Monster!
enjoy. *FF* #310
d Joe Sinnott.

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FANTASTIC FOUR VS. THE X-MEN



Taking place right after *FF* #300 and *Uncanny X-Men's* "Mutant Massacre" storyline, this four-issue miniseries (Feb.–June 1987) is written by Chris Claremont and drawn by Jon Bogdanove. The X-Men have many members down, especially Kitty Pryde, who is literally dissolving. Will Reed help her, or will Dr. Doom? Franklin is a central character in the story, and there are a lot of fun-filled fights between the two teams. Claremont is very good here with nice characterization and a different take on the FF. Available in two different hardcover editions, this mini is very good!

The FF are also obviously part of other group miniseries like *The Contest of Champions* or *Secret Wars* and *Secret Wars II*, especially in the first *Secret Wars*, in which Dr. Doom is a central character and She-Hulk joins the team.

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BACK ISSUE #74

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