

“Meet the Fantastic Four”: The Origins and Innovations of *The Fantastic Four*

The original idea to put a team together came from neither Stan Lee nor Jack Kirby. In *Origins of Marvel Comics* (1974), Stan Lee talks about his various roles “writing television material, advertising copy, and newspaper features” as well as “turning out comics by the carload, but nothing much was happening” (“If One”). Joan, his wife, encouraged him to focus on comics. Soon after he talked with publisher Martin Goodman who brought up *The Justice League of America*’s sales figures and asked him why don’t they “put out a comic book that features a team of super heroes?” (“If One”). The popular legend is that Goodman heard about the high sales of *Justice League of America* from Jack Liebowitz during a golf game (Evanier 114). Liebowitz said that encounter never happened, “but everybody knew what the sales were” anyway (114). Stan Lee recounts some version of this basic story in numerous interviews from 1981, 1998, 1999, and 2005 (Pitt 87, Thomas 137, Cangialosi 167, McLaughlin 210).

In any event, neither Kirby nor Lee were creating something wholly original. For example, the DC group Challengers of the Unknown debuted in *Showcase* #6 in February of 1957 before appearing in their own title in May of 1958. Among numerous similarities, Rocky, one of the four Challengers, gains the ability in issue #3 to shoot flame from his body and turn himself invisible. Various sources attribute Kirby as either creator or co-creator of the series (Evanier 106).

There were all sorts of other sources predating Challengers of the Unknown. For example, DC’s Plastic Man appeared twenty years earlier in *Police Comics* #1 from 1941. Also debuting in that issue are Phantom Lady, Human Bomb, Firebrand, and Mouthpiece who all have similarities to the Fantastic Four. In the case of Mister Fantastic, he debuts in *The Fantastic Four* #1 in November 1961, but DC’s Elongated Man appears in *The Flash* May of 1960. The

Thin Man appears in *Mystic Comics* #4 in June of 1940. Outside of comics, you can find precedents for the Invisible Girl such as *The Invisible Man* written by H.G. Wells in 1897 and Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* which has parallels with the Thing. The Human Torch has some overlap with the mythical King Midas as both have issues turning off their powers. However, a clearer line to the Human Torch comes from . . . the Human Torch, created by Carl Burgos. This earlier version appears in *Marvel Comics* #1 in October 1939 as an android named Jim Hammond with identical powers. In a 1981 interview, Stan Lee admits that "the one that was totally unoriginal, of course, was the Human Torch," but Lee does give himself credit for changing him from an android to a teenager and giving him a unique personality (Pitts, Jr. 94).

In a 2000 interview, Will Murray comments that "it looked as if you were reviving and reinventing old Golden Age Timely superheroes like the Human Torch, Flexo the Human Rubber Band, and the Blonde Phantom, giving them new twists" (178). Stan responds, "Flexo? I don't remember him. There was Plastic Man" (199). Murray presses, "You didn't ransack old Timey comics to create your Fantastic Four?" (179). Stan responds that "It's a strange thing. I've never done reference. I hate research. I never keep old books. If I wanted to go back, I wouldn't know where to look" (179). We must concur with Stan that indeed it is a strange thing. If we really want to reach back as far as we can go and get figuratively and literally elemental about it, we can link each character to an essential substance. The Thing corresponds to earth, Sue Storm to air, Johnny Storm to fire, and Reed Richards to water. Though this may be a fun matching game we can play with many, many comic book characters, the connections hold.

Though credits would be more finely distinguished in some later issues, the first page of the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* shows the four members at the top and says, "Stan Lee + Jack Kirby," which strongly suggests the two co-created the comic. At one point, Stan Lee

published a typed synopsis in #358 of *Fantastic Four* in 1991 that shows his original vision for the Fantastic Four and perhaps was offered as proof that he alone created the Fantastic Four. However, whether he wrote that before involving Kirby, after involving Kirby, or with Kirby remains an open question. Still, that synopsis remains a foundational document for understanding the early Fantastic Four.

Originally, Susan Storm is an “actress” and Ben Grimm “falls for Susan also,” creating a love triangle with Reed Richards (Synopsis). After they return from being “bombarded by cosmic rays” during a space flight, Susan “can not become visible again” (Synopsis). Expressing some concern about potential issues with nudity and decency, Stan Lee adds in parentheses, “Better talk to me about it, Jack,” which indicates some level of collaboration between the two (Synopsis). Johnny’s power is also not fully under control since “whenever he becomes excited, he bursts into flame,” but this “doesn’t last for more than 5 minutes” at which point he must wait until at last five more minutes have elapsed and he “gets excited again” (Synopsis). Reed’s character and powers remain more or less the same. However, after giving some examples of what Reed can do, Stan Lee adds that “it is quite painful to do all this, so he can only maintain the strange shapes for a very short period of [t]ime until the pain gets to be unbearable” (Synopsis).

Although “the four of them decide to form a unit,” they are not always in unison, mainly because of the Thing who is “not really a good guy” according to the synopsis. With the Thing’s arrival, José Alaniz in his *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* (2014) says that “The age of the antihero had begun” (96). Alaniz points to Matthew J. Costello and Bradford Wright when he writes, “Scholars of the Silver Age single out the creation of the Thing as a turning point in the genre and a decisive break with the sunnier Golden Age” (89). The synopsis tells us that because

the Thing “is jealous of Mr. Fantastic and dislikes Human Torch because Torch always sides with Fantastic,” readers are “always afraid he will sabotage the Fantastic Four’s efforts at whatever they are doing” (Synopsis). Furthermore, “he isn’t interested in helping mankind the way the other three are—he is more interested in winning Susan away from Mr. Fantastic” (Synopsis). Because of the “friction” and difference in “ethics,” the Thing will “always be unpredictable” (Synopsis). Though the Thing’s bad attitude would not turn out to be quite that bad, he still clashes frequently with his other team members. The Thing “had his lineage in the monster comics that Jack was still drawing at the time” and starts with a sort of mushy, oatmeal-like appearance that looks sharper and rockier over time (Evanier 122). While we know that hard exterior is in contrast with his soft interior, *The Fantastic Four* takes some time bringing out that dynamic. It is that dynamic—the handsome, athletic, and well-educated Ben Grimm’s tragic humanity encased within the tough hide of the clunky, disfigured, and ostracized Thing—that allows readers to see themselves and a variety of others in his place no matter how perfect or imperfect they may see themselves and/or those others. Alvaniz says that the Thing’s “resonance with readers, on the cusp of the countercultural swells of the 1960s, owes largely to its gathering together and subtly critiquing American prejudices over different sorts of emergent otherness (ethnic, racial, corporeal, religious)” (96). One implication of that statement is that *The Fantastic Four* was intersectional from the start.

Regardless of prior sources, *The Fantastic Four* is an original and unique title. The differences begin with the cover of the very first issue. In *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe points out that the cover of *The Fantastic Four* #1 “was nothing like the other superhero titles on the rack. There were no colorful costumes; the protagonists appeared small and helpless, and “the shakily rendered title logo looked almost like it had been drawn by a

child” (36). “The inside of the comics was similarly shambolic, as though the narrative had been improvised” in Howe’s estimation (37).

On the first page, we briefly see Reed Richards in a single frame, shooting a flare gun to assemble the team. The first character we meet is the Invisible Girl (she would not take the name Invisible Woman until issue # 284). Contrary to the early vision of the synopsis, she can make herself visible or invisible at will (*The Fantastic Four*). Her ability to generate and manipulate force fields would not appear until issue #22. The Thing appears next. True to the vision of the synopsis he is destructive and people are scared of him (4-5). Johnny Storm appears next. He appears to be able to turn his power on at will. His features are more blurred when he is aflame compared to later issues (6). Reed Richards appears in action last, using his stretching power to rescue a plummeting Johnny whose powers have flamed out (8). Readers then receive a flashback recalling the outer space mission that gave them their powers. Like the Hulk, Daredevil, Spider-Man, and the Leader, we see a preoccupation with radiation in the origin stories of Marvel heroes and villains.

From here, the Fantastic Four encounter the Mole Man who commands various monsters. We receive another origin flashback and learn that the Mole Man was once a normal but somewhat odd-looking person who after being ostracized for his appearance, headed to the outer edge of the world and discovered passage to the earth’s center where he learned to control its various monsters (22-23). He plans to use his monsters to “attack and destroy everything that lives on the surface” (23). Alaniz points out that “the Thing’s inauspicious public debut scene bears many resemblances to the villainous Mole Man’s origin story” as “both men inspire fear and disgust, but also sympathy” (92). The Thing has all the makings for a monster and even looks like one, yet for some reason—perhaps the support of his teammates—he stays balanced

on the edge without completely falling off it. In the final two pages, the Human Torch creates a rockslide sealing off the entrance to the Mole Man's empire (*The Fantastic Four* 25). Howe points out that as "snarling three-headed monsters are no longer where Lee's or Kirby's interests lie," the vanquishing of the monsters is a highly symbolic turning point for them, comics, and Marvel. (Howe 38). A reflective Howe states that "We're granted one last look at the creatures that might have been named Mongu or Sporr or Zztutak, before a rock slide seals them off forever and the Fantastic Four and Marvel Comics fly into the future" (38). Howe summarizes the direction the series would take in a couple of years. Tensions increased as "For more than six months . . . the Thing, stalked around in a sustained rage, unable to accept the permanence of his mutated state" while "Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Girl followed their nuptials with icy tension, as Reed became more and more withdrawn, obsessed with scientific pursuits" (71).

The Fantastic Four changed and influenced every team-based comic book and cartoon that came after whether it was DC's June 1963 *Doom Patrol*, Stan Lee and Kirby's own September 1963 *The X-Men*, 1986's *Watchmen*, *The Incredibles* in 2004, or *The Umbrella Academy* in 2007. (Of course, we can see multiple strains of influence besides *The Fantastic Four* in these various franchises.) Detailing both the contributions and impact of *The Fantastic Four*, Alaniz writes that "Lee and Kirby's admixture of irony, tragedy, and alienation in that series—about heroes whose powers separate them from society and complicate their interpersonal dynamics—would become the industry standard" (19).

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