

# 'Slugfest' Explores the Raging Rivalry Between Marvel and DC Comics

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By [Buzz Poole](#)

In 1961, Marvel was a second-tier comics publisher floundering beneath the cape-like shadow of Superman and the rest of the DC heroes. But in November of that year, though it would take some time before everyone realized it, Marvel altered the landscape of American popular culture with the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1. In his new book, *Slugfest: Inside the Epic 50-Year Battle Between Marvel and DC*, Reed Tucker details the story of how Stan Lee and Jack Kirby reinvented Marvel and ignited a rivalry with DC rife with barbs, double-crossing and power struggles that mirrored elements of the drama that played out on the pages of the companies' comics.

As a reader of comics, Reed first fell for Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, but Saturday morning cartoons, branded lunchboxes and playground arguments about whether Hulk could beat up Superman are his earliest memories of superhero culture. When we spoke on the phone, Reed, a freelance journalist who has been a staff writer for the *New York Post*, told me, "The idea for this book crystallized when DC/Warner Bros. was threatening to release *Batman vs. Superman* on the same day as Marvel's *Civil War*. When that happened the internet kind of exploded, and that showed me there was still a lot of fire in the rivalry."

Today, that rivalry is more about moviegoers than readers, but it's arrived there because of the clashing egos, theft and business maneuvering that Reed details in his book. He also makes clear the larger cultural ramifications of this ongoing battle, and how if you align more with DC or Marvel it's just as telling as whether you favor the Beatles over the Rolling Stones.

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**DC represented the old-school model and Marvel was a puckish upstart. Your take is that DC was too stuck in its ways to notice how the market was changing. But would you say that Marvel was paying attention to the market or just doing its own thing?**

I don't think Marvel was self-aware in particular. Stan Lee talks about how Mark Goodman, the man who ran Marvel back then, was always saying that the people who read their comics were young or they were idiots and to not aspire to much more than that. And the way Lee tells it, with *Fantastic Four* #1 he was trying to tell a story that he as an adult man would enjoy reading and find respectable. You could argue how much Jack Kirby had to do with the creation of that. But that's the story Lee tells.

But I don't think they were market geniuses. There was something in the wind in the early '60s. The kinds of characters that were popular in pop culture were more on the side of the antihero, like Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty from *On the Road*. In that way I think they capitalized on what was going on, but they didn't set out to change the market. It was serendipity that they created characters at a time when American culture was changing, and they benefited from that.

**You make the point that as DC started playing catch-up it tried too hard to capture the attitude and lingo that came so naturally to Stan Lee. So there were flops like *Brother Power the Geek*.**

Right. And 50 years later I can't believe *Brother Power the Geek* existed. I read the only two issues. It's really astonishing. Lightning strikes a mannequin and it comes to life and hangs out with a bunch of hippies. That's it—that's the whole story. You can just tell it was cranked out by guys in their forties and fifties who had no idea what youth culture was about. They'd seen hippies on the news or walking down the street but they had no idea how they talked, what actually interested them.



Reed Tucker (courtesy the author)

**A point you mention more than once is that DC was this kingdom divvied up into various fiefdoms. Marvel, on the other hand, became this creation of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. As both companies expanded and evolved and leveraged existing properties, DC not only suffered multiple misfires but also ran into narrative consistency problems, whereas all of Marvel already existed in this cohesive universe.**

For Marvel it happened by accident. In the '50s, Marvel's distributor went out of business and the only company that would take them was Independent News, which was owned by DC. So Independent News and DC limited the number of titles Marvel was allowed to publish to eight, which was good and bad for Marvel. It was bad because they didn't have much market share but good because it allowed them to have one editor, Stan Lee at the time, impose his vision on all of the titles. And that was how the Marvel universe was built. Over at DC there were decades of these characters and all these different editors handling these books and they didn't interact all that much. In part because certain editors didn't like to lend their characters to other editors. And so you had all these storylines at DC taking place in their own little universes. But Marvel changed all that. In an early *Fantastic Four*, Submariner, an old Marvel character, shows up and that broke open the floodgates. Readers realized that all these Marvel characters existed in one universe and because Stan Lee was running the whole thing he was able to build something cohesive, which the fans really, really loved. The conventional wisdom was that you *didn't* build a universe, because you didn't want to alienate readers who couldn't buy every issue. But Marvel found the opposite to be true.

DC retroactively decided they would create a cohesive universe and take continuity more seriously in the '60s. This coincided with the fans taking it more seriously, too. And so it started to bother the fans that DC would contradict itself. For example, in one issue, the Atom, who could shrink himself, was said to not be able to shrink inanimate objects—but then, next issue, he could. So all the DC characters had these jagged backstories that didn't fit together and it was never a smooth build. Even to this day, they're still trying to explain away errors.

**Both DC and Marvel pushed licensing and merchandising opportunities from the jump. DC put a Superman balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1940, just two years after the hero's debut. But you peg the real merchandising groundswell to Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* movie with Michael Keaton. But by then do you think it was really about the character, or was it more a product of rabid consumerism?**

I have friends with kids who are into Superman, or Batman, or Wonder Woman, and I ask how do they know about them. The parents say, "They just know." Merchandising is the gateway. It's how kids today first learn about these characters, it's how we learned about them. But in speaking to the writers who were working in the '70s and '80s, merchandising was not huge money for them. The Tim Burton movie changed all that, and I think it's because by then these figures were pop-culture icons.

**You write of DC and Marvel today that they are both "cogs within multinational corporate machines, valued less for their publishing profits than for their vast intellectual property libraries." Even so, plenty of social-media taunts get pushed around, basically saying if you like DC you can't like Marvel and vice versa. Starting in the 1960s, it seems pretty clear why the two houses appealed to different types of readers. But what is it today that keeps the rivalry alive?**

I think a lot of it is legacy. The people who are really into the rivalry, especially in terms of the films, grew up reading the comics and knowing about the publishing rivalry in the '70s and '80s. So they always considered it part of their identity—whether they are a Marvel person or a DC person. I also think that to this day there remain big differences between the companies and the characters. If you align with DC, you're probably more conservative, you're probably into heroes who are more straightforward. And Marvel, despite the fact they're owned by Disney, tries to cultivate that outsider image. They still try to look like the scrappy upstart they were in the 1960s.

**So did peeling back the layers deromanticize any of this for you?**

I guess it did, a bit. In part because of the images the companies have built up about the kinds of places they are, especially Marvel. Marvel in the '60s, through Stan Lee, really cultivated the image of this fun, freewheeling place. And it may have been true to an extent back then, but the more you learn about it the more you realize these were businesses; they're under the same conditions of any other business. For me, it was driven home reading about all the Marvel bankruptcy stuff in the 1990s. There had been this myth of what Marvel was and how this Wall Street financier came along,

tried to milk it for every dollar and everything came crashing down. And you realize that there was nothing magical about it. It's just another company.

But at the same time, they still churn out products that mean a lot to many, many people and it's hard to take that away. So no matter how businesslike or callous the companies are, I still have a fondness for them, more so than Johnson & Johnson or Clorox.

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