

**J**UST because this is the start of Part Two, that doesn't mean we're finished with Part One. There are still some things I want to mention about *The Fantastic Four*. This is just to warn you that, if you expect a tightly structured text, you're not apt to find it when the author is a guy whose comic-book stories used to ramble on from issue to issue, even weaving around from one title to another—and back again—if I happened to remember.

After rereading the first FF yarn which graces the preceding pages, a slightly disturbing thought just hit me. Those of you who may be neophytes in the realm of comicism might, with some justification, ask what all the shouting was about. Certainly, looking back at the strip, more than a decade later, the artwork seems to be an unlikely candidate for some future Sistine Chapel, while the quality of the writing will hardly be a threat to the reputation of Dickens or Hugo.

But if you were familiar with the comic-book genre in those halcyon days of yore, you'd possibly have reacted the way so many thousands of other startled readers did when they suddenly realized they were reading a superhero saga that was extravagantly different from those that had gone before. And it was that very difference that started it all.

For example, in the early strip we tried to give some dimension to the melancholy Moleman. Remember where he explains how he reached his underground kingdom on *Monster Isle*—and why? Didn't you find yourself sympathizing with him, just a bit? There he was, ostracized by his fellow man—and woman—because his physical appearance left a little something to be desired. He couldn't find acceptance in our world, so he set out to find another—one which might have a place for him. Now this was hardly reaching the dramatic heights of a Kafka, but it was almost unheard of in a comic book. Heretofore, villains were villains just because they were vil-

lains. Comics merely had good guys and bad guys, and nobody ever bothered with the whys or wherefores. But here, in the first fateful issue of *The Fantastic Four*, our readers were given a villain with whom they might empathize—a villain who was driven to what he had done by the slings and arrows of a heartless, heedless humanity. It was a first. It was an attempt to portray a three-dimensional character in a world that had been composed of stereotypes. To comic bookdom, it was tantamount to the invention of the wheel.

Similarly, the episode where Ben Grimm and Reed Richards begin to fight after their rocket ship has crash landed—and where Ben tells Reed, “You don’t have to make a speech, big shot,” as well as the other instances scattered throughout the strip where Ben is caustic and abrasive to Reed and the world in general—all these negative touches had been virtually unknown to comic books till then. Members of superhero teams were always the best of friends, with never a cross word between them. Good guys were never sarcastic, never bitter; yet here was a team with a raving malcontent, one whose paranoia was to increase with succeeding issues.

I might as well call your attention to the dialogue, also. While it’s a far cry from Paddy Chayefsky, you may notice the definite effort that was made to have people speak as much as possible like real flesh-and-blood humans, whether they were cab drivers, policemen, garage mechanics, pilots, or whatever. While reasonably natural dialogue is so much a part of writing that I feel foolish even mentioning it, you must remember that we’re talking about a form of the media and a time period where “So! You wanna play, huh?” was formerly considered a meaningful, profound exclamation when uttered by a hero in the process of being pummeled by a villain or two.

As a matter of fact, it was in order to demonstrate how our attempt to inject realism into our stories—through both characterization and dialogue—grew progressively stronger and more successful and to show how the quality of the artwork improved measurably from issue to issue that I’ve included the more recent “When Strikes the Silver Surfer,” as well as the other strips you’ll encounter in this titanic tome as we hurtle along on our jocular journey through Marvel’s beginning. So don’t go away—especially since we’re about to zero in on *The Incredible Hulk*.

Speaking of *The Hulk*—and it’s about time we did—I know you’ll be whelmed to learn that he was the second one created in Marvel’s

growing stable of slightly sanguinary superstars. As each succeeding issue of *The Fantastic Four* increased in sales and in popularity, we felt it behooved us no longer to deny a breathlessly waiting mankind the indescribable pleasure of another mighty Marvel superhero.

But I seem to hear you ask, "How did you know *The Fantastic Four* was growing in popularity? Sales we can understand. But how do you gauge a magazine's popularity?" Good question. I was hoping you'd ask.

Prior to *The Fantastic Four*, fan mail was almost unknown to us. Oh, we might have received a letter or two during the year, but it was always this type: "Dear Editor, I bought a copy of *Kid Colt Outlaw* and there was one staple missing from the binding. I want my money back." Hardly what you'd call a flood of fan mail.

But no sooner did *FF* #1 hit the stands than we actually started to receive letters that said something. "Loved your new mag. All you've gotta do is make Reed Richards less stuffy—and show us more of *The Invisible Girl*." "The Thing's the best character I ever saw. I hope he'll stop being a monster real soon." "How does *The Human Torch* burst into flame? What makes him fly? Why don't you give him his own magazine?"

It was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to us. We found out that there were actually real live readers out there—readers who took the trouble to contact us, readers who wanted to talk to us about our characters, about our stories. With each new letter they got to know us better, and what was more important, we got to know them. We learned what they liked, what they didn't like, what they wanted to see more of . . . and less of. After a while I began to feel I wasn't even the editor; I was just following orders—orders which came in the mail. And one request which was repeated with ever-increasing frequency was "When will you bring out another new superhero book?"

Finally, we had to yield to the burgeoning blandishments of our legion of pen pals. But what was our next effort to be? Admittedly, we had struck pay dirt by introducing a series featuring an iconoclastic team of superheroes. But I didn't want us to get into a rut. I was determined that our next production not concern itself with another team. After all, our fans (and what a kick it was to be able to think of them as fans rather than merely readers) kept referring to us as innovators, and I wasn't about to let anything change their minds.

