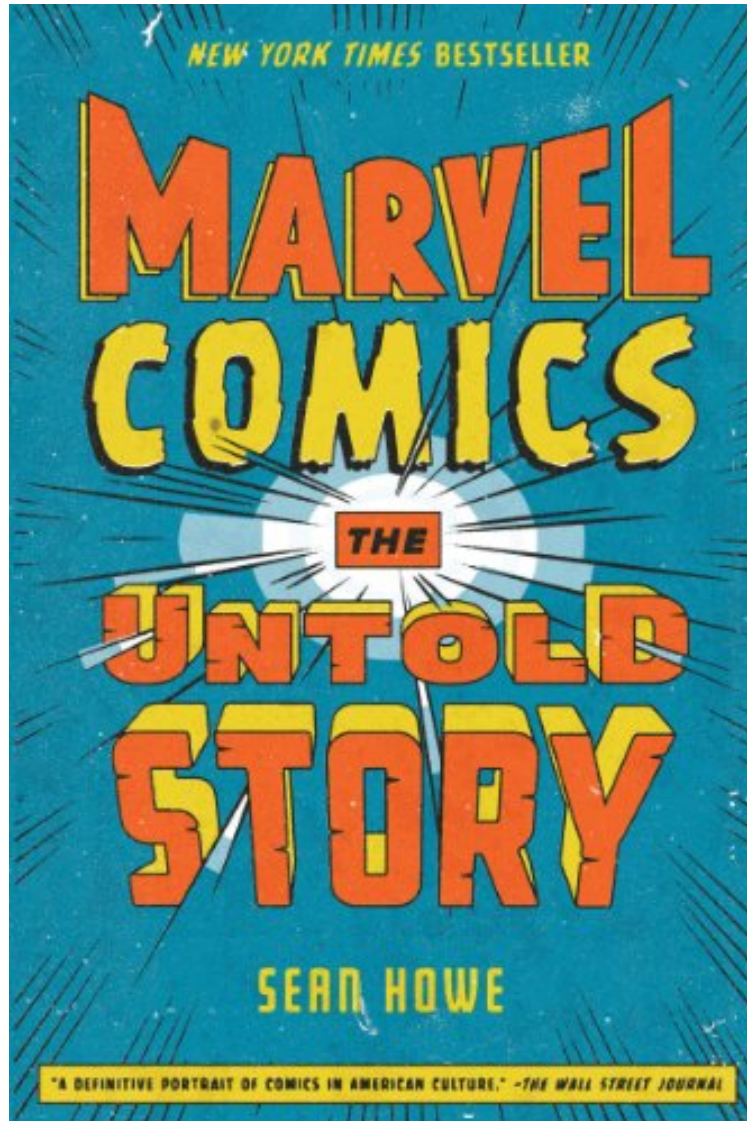


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Marvel Comics: The Untold Story

Sean Howe

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Sean Howe : Marvel Comics: The Untold Story before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*:

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. From excelsior to excess
By Karl Janssen
At first I was a little skeptical about the subtitle of Sean Howe's 2012 book *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. I grew up reading *Marvel Comics* and have read other books on the company's history. After finishing Howe's version, however, I'm happy to report that his investigative journalism into Marvel's past is quite impressive, and the book makes for a truly fascinating read. For the first couple chapters, I wasn't so sure. In Chapter 1 Howe covers the entire history of Marvel, formerly known as *Timely Comics*, up through the 1950s. That's the entire

Golden Age in less than 30 pages! Howe isn't really concerned, however, with the myriad genres that Timely used to publish—western, horror, romance, funny animals, and so on. This is really a history of what Marvel is most famous for—the superheroes, beginning with the Silver Age pantheon created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and in some cases, Steve Ditko. Chapter 2 covers the birth of the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Thor, the Avengers, X-Men, and Spider-Man. Howe's recaps of origin stories and mythologies get a little long-winded, leaving one to wonder when the "untold story" is going to begin. From that point on, however, the book really hits its stride and becomes incredibly addictive, with vivid details and surprising revelations on every page. This isn't a literary history of Marvel's creative glories, but rather a true business history, replete with mergers, acquisitions, and struggles for administrative power. I'll confess some of the financial and legal details were over my head, and at times, I could have used a little less detail. Over the course of superhero comics history, writers and artists continually defected from Marvel to DC and back again, and Howe keeps you apprised of each and every arrival and departure. Nevertheless, it's better to commit sins of excess than omission, and Howe's thorough, behind-the-scenes expose of life inside the Marvel bullpen is probably the next-best thing to working there. Though written in the third person, the book has the feel of an oral history, likely because Howe interviewed about 150 former Marvel employees. Howe lets all sides get their two cents in without passing judgment. The long-fought battle between Lee and Kirby over creative ownership of certain characters, for example, is handled in a fairly balanced manner. Howe diligently follows the trail of rancor, and neither party comes out smelling like a rose. Stan the Man comes across as somewhat pathetically clueless, while King Kirby is depicted as taking his justifiable grievances to delusional excess. In general, Howe subtly favors individual creators over big business, but he always presents both sides of an argument. Though Howe celebrates the company's creative triumphs, his overall picture of the Marvel empire is rather unflattering. As he charts the trajectory of the publisher through boom and bust periods, he makes it pretty clear that over time the company has sacrificed creative quality in favor of commercialism, diluting the integrity of its treasured characters for a quick buck. As one of the many fans Marvel lost in the '90s, I have a tendency to agree with him, which is perhaps why I enjoyed the book so much. There are other good books on Marvel history out there, like the self-congratulatory *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History* or Mark Evanier's excellent biography *Kirby: King of Comics*, but if you're looking for one book that's going to give you the clearest, most complete picture of the Marvel story, this is it.

31 of 32 people found the following review helpful. An adult look at a childhood hobby...By timFirst, let me say that my title doesn't mean the hobby isn't for adults. I wrote that in perspective to my own collecting (I'm 33 now) that started when I was 12. That childhood "innocence" resonated throughout this whole book for me. This is a very dark book. Not dark as in scary, or dangerous, per se; dark as shady. The comic world behind the scenes was a very cut throat and competitive world. Marvel, from its inception, was about the business and Howe hits on this point early and often. As readers we are led from the beginnings of Timely through the superhero renaissance of the Silver Age and into the modern era, never letting go of the fact that the bottom line is the motivating factor. There is no more fantasy. Another key thread that weaves its way in and out of the narrative, though never too far out of reach, is Stan Lee's idea of "illusion of change". It hits hard, but many of the people who read this book will be long time collectors, lovers of the medium, and will probably understand this whether they know it or not. I still find it, in an artistic sense, to be shallow and really throw an ugly light on the medium. You'll get a very even, outside, perspective of the Lee/Kirby/Ditko arguments which have been fought over the years, and though I do ultimately believe Stan took and was rewarded for, way more credit than he deserved, this book adds a bit of depth to the discussion. None of those guys were entirely saints. There is a couple of bright spots to the book that shine particularly bright. Reading about the Bronze Age and the expression of guys like Starlin, Englehart, Gerber, and Steranko, really provide inspiration and evidence that there are creators out there who truly love the work they do. I also got this impression when he finally hits the Quesada era at the end. Say what you will of Quesada's methods and ideas, and though he did adhere greatly to the bottom line, his love of comics also drove him to (in my opinion) bring the Marvel Universe out of a completely lackluster 90s. Another piece of light Howe focuses on is the Marvels series from Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. As a teen that was probably the first work to truly blow my mind and now, older, reading it again, really helps to appreciate the S.A. books I've been able to comb back through over the years. In five issues those two truly were able to capture the Marvel Age. In the end; I think this is a book that every comic fan should read. Especially relevant in the times of the New 52 and Marvel Now, the "illusion of change" line hangs heavy. Howe keeps things short but important so reads really well if you're in the mood to sit down and crush a hundred pages a pop.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. It's A Bird! It's A Plane! It's The Other Guys!By Franklin the MouseGod knows, creative people are not usually the easiest creatures to work with and the passion that comic readers invest in these things is way beyond what I consider healthy. Sending out death threats to writers or artists because they killed a comic-book character isn't exactly someone working with a full storyboard in their head. Mr. Howe's "Marvel Comics: The Untold Story" is a clear-eyed view of the birth and evolution of the mighty comic publisher. A large portion of the book focuses more on the dynamics between management and the creators. The author thankfully avoids immersing "Marvel Comics" into the different cartoon characters' adventures. Sadly, all the illustrators who were the visual and sometimes creative brainchilds of the now iconic superheroes such

as Spiderman, Captain America, Fantastic Four, Hulk, Wolverine and X-Men were looked upon as peons by the original owner Martin Goodman and the other executives who followed in his footsteps. The author does an excellent job of separating fact and fiction about the myths that have arisen around Stan Lee and illustrator-extraordinaire Jack Kirby. The book certainly removed any romantic impressions I had about working in such a demanding and temperamental field. It was disheartening to see how a scrappy little company churned out these wonderful creations and eventually morphed into a corporate nightmare under the tutelage of odious, corporate raiders Ron Perelman and then Carl Icahn. At some points, you'll shake your head in disbelief at the gang-that-couldn't-shoot-straight executives' actions. I imagine "Marvel Comics" is a work that will interest people who read comics or have an interest in how the industry works. It would be nice to see a book written about the other publishing Goliath, DC Comics. Mr. Howe has written an extremely engaging book.

An unvarnished, unauthorized, behind-the-scenes account of one of the most dominant pop cultural forces in contemporary America. Operating out of a tiny office on Madison Avenue in the early 1960s, a struggling company called Marvel Comics presented a cast of brightly costumed characters distinguished by smart banter and compellingly human flaws. Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, Captain America, the Incredible Hulk, the Avengers, Iron Man, Thor, the X-Men, Daredevil—these superheroes quickly won children's hearts and sparked the imaginations of pop artists, public intellectuals, and campus radicals. Over the course of a half century, Marvel's epic universe would become the most elaborate fictional narrative in history and serve as a modern American mythology for millions of readers. Throughout this decades-long journey to becoming a multibillion-dollar enterprise, Marvel's identity has continually shifted, careening between scrappy underdog and corporate behemoth. As the company has weathered Wall Street machinations, Hollywood failures, and the collapse of the comic book market, its characters have been passed along among generations of editors, artists, and writers—also known as the celebrated Marvel "Bullpen." Entrusted to carry on tradition, Marvel's contributors—impoverished child prodigies, hallucinating peaceniks, and mercenary careerists among them—struggled with commercial mandates, a fickle audience, and, over matters of credit and control, one another. For the first time, Marvel Comics reveals the outsized personalities behind the scenes, including Martin Goodman, the self-made publisher who forayed into comics after a get-rich-quick tip in 1939; Stan Lee, the energetic editor who would shepherd the company through thick and thin for decades; and Jack Kirby, the World War II veteran who'd co-created Captain America in 1940 and, twenty years later, developed with Lee the bulk of the company's marquee characters in a three-year frenzy of creativity that would be the grounds for future legal battles and endless debates. Drawing on more than one hundred original interviews with Marvel insiders then and now, Marvel Comics is a story of fertile imaginations, lifelong friendships, action-packed fistfights, reformed criminals, unlikely alliances, and third-act betrayals— a narrative of one of the most extraordinary, beloved, and beleaguered pop cultural entities in America's history.

From Booklist: "Howe's in-depth account of Marvel's business history, revered personalities, and pop-culturally ingrained characters boasts exhaustively researched and intricately integrated information. And loads of it, as this isn't just one story—it's a bunch of knotted tales strung together. It's Stan Lee and Jack Kirby creating a pantheon of modern American superheroes. It's the rote staff changes and personnel quirks that made Marvel the company it was. It's the siren call of Hollywood cash that made it the company it is today. It's a look at the American comic-book industry as a whole over the last half-century. It's a priceless collection of anecdotes about the artists and writers reflecting and filtering the eras they worked in. The most timely strand threads through issues of creators' rights and intellectual property, an argument that's heating up today's comics climate. Casual fans may find more than they bargained for, but for the Marvel faithful, this is the definitive book on the company responsible for aligning the cosmos in their favorite fictional universe. —Ian Chipman

"Sean Howe's history of Marvel makes a compulsively readable, riotous and heartbreaking version of my favorite story, that of how a bunch of weirdos changed the world. That it's all true is just frosting on the cake." (Jonathan Lethem)

"A warts-and-all, nail-biting mini-epic about the low-paid, unsung funnybook men who were unwittingly creating twenty-first century pop culture. If you thought the fisticuffs were bare and bloody on the four-color page, wait til you hear about what went down in the Marvel bullpen." (Patton Oswalt)

"Exhaustively researched and artfully assembled, Marvel Comics is a historical exploration, a labor of love, and a living illustration of how the weirdest corners of the counterculture can sometimes become the culture-at-large." (Chuck Klosterman)

"Page after page, Sean Howe's Marvel Comics manages to be enchantingly told, emotionally suspenseful and totally revelatory. If I knew more about superpowers, I'd be able to explain how he did it." (Sloane Crosley)

"Sean Howe is to Marvel Comics what Procopius was to the Byzantine Empire: a court gossip of breathtaking thoroughness and exactitude, and a sly and nuanced writer. It is imperative that this work not fall into the hands of alien species, or be done for." (Luc Sante)

"A jittery, hilarious, anecdotal, and exhaustive history of the company. . . . If you're a comics fan, this is essential reading. If you're not, then it's merely fascinating. Howe has written a biographical

history of modern America's id"; (GQ)"; Sean Howers'; gripping new history lays out five decades of Marvel adventures and insanity, and will make you believe that comic-book creators have even weirder lives than their mutant creations." (Rolling Stone)"; Marvel Comics is a meticulous chronicle of the real secret origins of the superhero, a tragic love story about the relationship between a long parade of passionate, talented superhero devotees and the company that didn't love them back." (The Los Angeles Times)"; It's about time somebody wrote Marvel Comics: The Untold Story, and it looks like Sean Howe was the right guy for the job. Howers' clear-eyed history. . . is as full of colorful characters, tragic reversals and unlikely plot twists as any book in the Marvel canon." (Newsday)"; Exhaustively researched and extraordinarily compelling. . . A quasi-Shakespearean portrayal of Marvel as it moves from spirited upstart to ruthless corporate colossus." (Salon)"; A superpowered must-read for anyone hooked on comics, as well as a gripping story for someone merely enlightened by a genre that's always had to fight for respect. It's much more about ordinary, flawed humans than super men and women, and therein lies its excellence." (USA Today)"; Howe, a widely published critic with a real knack, rare for his field, for reporting, gets farther inside the company than anyone else has. . . An essential read for anyone who loves comics, but civilians with a taste for gossip will enjoy it too." (The Daily Beast)"; A corporate biography of America's most significant comic-book publisher and a definitive portrait of comics in American culture. . . Howe offers vivid reporting and enticing detail. . . The result is a book both authoritative and charmingly readable." (The Wall Street Journal)"; Fascinating, compelling reading. . . Exhaustively researched. . . What ultimately propels you to keep turning the pages of this fat, enjoyable book are the endless anecdotes about how the Marvel Universe was shaped." (The Miami Herald)"; A vivid account. . . Comics have proven an enduring art form, gaining new fans without losing the old ones. Howers' exhaustively researched love letter to Marvel should find grateful readers among both groups." (The Boston Globe)"; Hugely entertaining." (The New Republic)

From the Back Cover
In the early 1960s, a struggling company called Marvel Comics presented a cast of brightly costumed characters distinguished by smart banter and compellingly human flaws: Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, the X-Men. Over the course of half a century, Marvel's epic universe would become the most elaborate fictional narrative in history and serve as a modern American mythology for millions of readers. For the first time, Marvel Comics reveals the outsized personalities behind the scenes, including Martin Goodman, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and generations of editors, artists, and writers who struggled with commercial mandates, a fickle audience, and—over matters of credit and control—one another. Marvel Comics is a story of fertile imaginations, lifelong friendships, action-packed fistfights, and third-act betrayals—a narrative of one of the most extraordinary, beloved, and beleaguered pop-cultural entities in America's history.