

MARIE SEVERIN



THE
MIRTHFUL
MISTRESS
OF
COMICS



BY **DEWEY CASSELL**
WITH AARON SULTAN

SEV.

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HOME

For all of us, the process of defining who we are and the person we will grow up to be starts at home. So, to gain insight into the “origins” of Marie Severin, what better place to start than with her family and friends?

to be a good income to aspire to. So a lot of people were discouraged, but we weren't. My parents said, “If you like to draw, go ahead and make something of it.” So that was a prelim to my growing up and falling into comics.

Cassell: *What did your father do for a living?*

Severin: He was a designer for Elizabeth Arden, the cosmetics firm. He had gone to Pratt Institute and was really a very good painter, but in the Twenties and Thirties you couldn't earn a living for a family, I guess, so he went into business, and they recognized him as very talented. So Elizabeth Arden was, and I think still is, a pretty good, respected cosmetic firm. He would design the labels, packaging design, bottle ornamentation. The bottles, I think most of them were made in France, but he would design all kinds of lettering and new products, and so forth. And she gave him his own little studio, and he was her personal artist. Of course, they had a studio, but usually she had him start something off, and then he would ship it off. I believe that's how it was done at the time. He would do initial design for her approval, and then it would go to a promotional studio to be worked up into a label, where it would be manufactured. My father, that's how he earned his living, and my mother was always encouraging us because she knew we were all crazy, so she went along with it. Books and stuff were very important in our lives, and that was very nice. So we always had a pretty good background as a source for our imagination growing.

Cassell: *Did your dad work in New York City?*

Severin: Yes, he did, and also in Long Island City, which is in Queens, I believe. They had a factory there, and they gave him a nice studio there to work with. And he would go in to New York when he had to see her or whatever was going on. It was pretty good, although I'm sure he would have been happier doing regular artwork, but it was at least related to what he was good at, and he earned a good living.

Cassell: *So did your mother work outside the home at all?*

Severin: No, my mother was a homebody. She never really did that much drawing, but she would love to sit around and talk with us. She was very encouraging, and liked art, songs, and things. And she was very appreciative of our application of talent.

Cassell: *You said that she liked to sew, so it sounds like she was a creative person, too.*

FAMILY

SOMETIMES, IT SEEMS THAT a person is predestined to follow a certain path. As if they were born to their vocation, endowed with gifts the rest of us can only envy and try to emulate. People for whom their innate ability, combined with a nurturing environment, leads to greatness. Not that they don't have to work at it, but rather that the work is made to appear almost effortless. A natural.

So it was with Marie Severin. The interview that follows provides insight into the talented family into which Marie was born on August 21, 1929, and the support and encouragement that she received when she displayed an early interest in drawing.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Dewey Cassell: *Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Where were they from and what did they do?*

Marie Severin: Well, both were talented people. I think they brought John and I up with great respect for what we wanted to do. My father always had paper in the house for us to draw on. My mother could sew and she used to design her own clothes when she was a young woman. She was from Syracuse, New York. And my father was born in Oslo, Norway, and he came here when he was three years old, and was in World War I. He worked in the trenches and had great respect for the United States, and he was a great guy, and my mother was terrific. But my brother and I really respected our parents a lot. And John was marvelous when he was younger. He always shared stuff with me. I think John was seven years old [when I was born]. Anyway, at that age, he was protective of me, until he started playing baseball and all that stuff. But he was a good brother. [We] always had fun. And always it was accepted in our house if you liked to draw. That was nice. I've heard when I was growing up about people who wanted to draw and their parents at the time thought it was foolish. It wasn't thought

Severin: Oh, yeah, she was. They definitely encouraged my brother and I.

Cassell: *So how did your mother and father meet?*

Severin: My father was in World War I, and my mother and what turned out to be their best friend worked as young people who did his job while he was away. When he came back from the service, that's when she met him. And they started dating and got married.

Cassell: *Oh, wow.*

Severin: Yeah, it was nice. On Wall Street. I think he was an accountant. I never asked too much about her schooling, but she did go to school, and I guess she was able to partake in whatever he did with Wall Street, [and] when he came back from the war, they started dating, eventually. So that's how they got together.

Cassell: *Oh, that's great.*

Severin: That statue of Nathan Hale, who was hung in New York for being an American spy? "I regret I have but one life to give for my country"—I don't know whether you know it. Well, under that statue is where he proposed to her. They were out for lunch one day and he asked her to marry him. I'm so glad.

Cassell: *So he didn't go to work for Elizabeth Arden until after the war?*

Severin: Oh, he didn't start at Elizabeth Arden until, I guess about 1930. He was doing odd jobs in the business, because he was a good accountant. But, yeah, he worked for Elizabeth Arden I believe starting around 1930, maybe a couple of years later. When I was growing up that's where he was, and he stayed there until he retired.

Cassell: *So what year was your brother born?*

Severin: Let me see. I was born in '29 and he's seven years older than I.

Cassell: *So '22, huh?*

Severin: Yes. We're two old farts. [laughter]

Cassell: *Where were you all living when you were born?*

Severin: I was born out in East Rockaway, Long Island, and my brother I think was born in Jersey City. Then they moved to Long Island, New York, and then I came along and disrupted everything.

Cassell: *So how early did you start showing artistic ability?*

Severin: Well, growing up I remember sitting in front of the fireplace drawing, before we

moved to Brooklyn. I must have seen people drawing and then [started] scribbling at a very early age, because I was four when I came to Brooklyn. So I was making ugly things on paper before then. I don't remember a lot of things when I was very little, but I do remember doing that in the old house. I don't remember what I'd draw. It was probably scribbling. But I remember, it was what you did in my house, you drew. And I liked it. I always have.

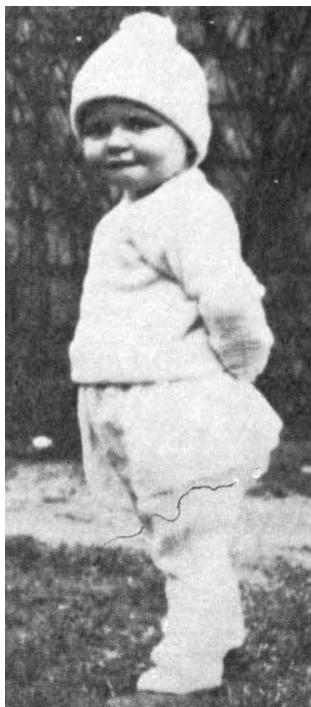
Cassell: *Did they encourage you to color between the lines and all that?*

Severin: I didn't have access to color, that I remember. I don't remember crayons when I was a kid. I don't remember coloring like that. I remember watercolors because my father used to have them. I don't remember [using] watercolors. I guess I would have been dangerous with them. [laughter] I wasn't allowed to get into that because I was too young, at the time. I remember my father was always helping my brother and I doing posters for school. Y'know, we always were doing posters for the play or fund raisers. But, for the most part, I was very happy drawing just pencil stuff. I don't even remember what I drew, I just drew. And I loved once I got old enough to go to the movies, and I really enjoyed drawing stuff from the movies.

Cassell: *Oh, really? Like the characters?*

Severin: And the situations. I didn't do portraits of movie stars at all. I just let my imagination go. But, mostly, when I was little, people used to read to me, which I loved. Even today, if somebody reads to me, I love it. And my imagination came from—my brother had the old Edgar Rice Burroughs books, Tarzan, and I would follow right through with that. My aunts would give me nice girly books, but I loved the adventure ones. I was already ruined by being read to. When I got to read the adventure books like *Ivanhoe* and all that stuff, I ate it up. We had a nice book room in our house, but also I would love, once I got to the library, once I was old enough

Marie as a toddler (left), from issue #8 of *FOOM*, and a mid-1950s photo taken in the offices of EC Comics. *Courtesy of Marie (and Jon B. Cooke).*





LEFT Photo of Peg and Jack Severin, parents of John and Marie, with Johnny Craig (right) in the early 1950s at their home. **RIGHT** John and Marie. *Courtesy of Bill Leach and Anne Grandinetti, respectively.*

for that, I devoured it. And I think that's so good for anybody who can draw, because you fill your mind up with stuff. I feel that [now] a lot of people are just watching TV instead of reading. Reading is more of an exercise than TV, where you're fed a lot of information. I think reading makes you exercise your mind to visualize it.

Cassell: *I agree. I think it improves your vocabulary, too.*

Severin: Yeah. Although I love television, too, but I don't know whether I'd be the same person if I hadn't been raised reading. I don't know. You know what I mean? I can't analyze it that much, but all I know is that I liked the combination I had of reading and pictures. And old radio was wonderful. We really have no concept today of what it would be like if we just had radio, because what an exercise that was.

Cassell: *It's true. I don't think people today can properly appreciate how the "War of the Worlds" occurred, with H. G. Wells.*

Severin: Of course! Yeah, I guess, as much as we've said about it, things were created very beautifully in past centuries without TV, radio or anything else, [just] a lot of reading. So we're progressing pretty good. Gosh knows what we'll be like in the 24 Century.

Cassell: *So your father designed things for a living, used artistry as part of his occupation, but did he enjoy drawing for fun, as well?*

Severin: Oh, yeah. He would like to do cartoons, and that's what my brother and I [learned]. He loved to [do it to] tease people or for somebody's birthday, and my brother and I were very giving that way, too. We found people got such a kick out of something that you make for somebody, whether it be an afghan, or a greeting card, or knitting a hat, I mean, people love it as presents for them. And I think a drawing exhibits... attention. It's attention. It's a special gift, and you feel very gratified when you do it and people appreciate it. It's nice.

That giving spirit of Marie's is one that would stay with her during her school years and on into her professional career. School also brought new opportunities to exhibit her artistic talents, as noted in the next chapter about her friends. But first, a few words about Marie from her equally talented sibling.



THE SEVERIN FAMILY PRODUCED more than one exceptional artist. John Severin is extremely well respected in the industry and has had a prolific and noteworthy career of his own. John not only helped Marie get started in comics, but the pair worked together at both EC and Marvel Comics, and even teamed up on Marvel's sword-and-sorcery title, *Kull the Conqueror* (which is described in more detail in the section on Heroes.) Here, then, is some insight from the unique perspective of "Ri-ri's" brother, John, in this interview conducted by Aaron Sultan.

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SEVERIN

Aaron Sultan: *So how old were you when Marie was born, roughly?*

John Severin: Oh, eight or nine.

Sultan: *So you're quite a bit older.*

John Severin: Yeah. But we got closer after I came back from the service. We were on a par, and we could talk about art and stuff like that. But we had our different things. Different lifestyles.



Sultan: *I've got a sibling seven years younger than I am, so I can relate to what you're saying.*

John Severin: That's about the same thing, yeah. But all I'd do is protect her. From what, I don't know. There weren't many boogymen around. Well, they may have been around, but they kept themselves more hidden than these days.

Sultan: *What are your earliest memories of Marie? Any kind of anecdote you can think of?*

John Severin: Well, I put her in a strong cardboard box, put a hole on either side, run a rope through, and tie it to our dog, and said, "Ho! Ho!" And off she'd go down around the house. She'd get a riot out of the darned thing. I didn't hang out with her much though. I had a lot of friends.

Sultan: *What was she like as a child? Was she rambunctious?*

John Severin: I just have to think. She was a pretty easygoing kid. She had a good sense of humor, laughed a lot, and talked a lot.

Sultan: *Did she have a lot of neighborhood girls as friends? Or did she start drawing, like you did, in the highchair?*

John Severin: I don't know about the highchair, but she started drawing quite young. And I don't remember so much of her playing dolls. She played with guns. I don't know where she got their influence; she had a lot of girlfriends. And she went to a girls' high school. Of course, then, tons of girlfriends. But, you know, since we moved in parallels but not next to one another, I don't know what. I surmise from certain key things that I'm aware of.

Sultan: *Where did you both get your sense of humor from? Is that the way it was in your household, lots of laughing and joking?*

John Severin: Joking, but most of them didn't laugh at the jokes. Everybody sort of made jokes. They were unconsciously making jokes. They just said things in a funny way, and I guess it accumulated with the younger ones.

Sultan: *Do you remember Marie playing any practical jokes?*

John Severin: No, I played the practical jokes. I don't remember her doing it.

Sultan: *Do you remember anything about what Marie liked to draw as a child?*

John Severin: She developed a character out of herself that she would put in all sorts of situations. Like, if she's welcoming somebody, or "happy birthdays," she had this little character. And she called her "Ri-ri" because, when she was a baby, she couldn't say "Marie." She would say "Ri-ri."

Sultan: *She still does that. My friend Dewey sent her a Christmas card one year, and she sent an EC-related thing back with her walking down these dungeon steps and looking over her shoulder, but it was a little tiny Marie.*

John Severin: Yeah. That's Ri-ri.

Sultan: *Wow. Did she give you birthday cards or anything with little Ri-ris?*

John Severin: Oh, yeah. When I was overseas, I even got this little Ri-ri in my mail.

Sultan: *Did you go the movies with her? If so, what kinds of movies?*

John Severin: When she was little I used to take her to the movies, but aside from Shirley Temple, what do I know? I don't remember.

Sultan: *Let's go to the EC days. You started working at EC before Marie. How did Marie get the job at EC?*

John Severin: Well, she was working at a card company. I don't remember what she was doing. And Harvey [Kurtzman] needed a colorist to work in the office under his supervision, and he asked me if I thought my sister would be interested or could do it. I don't know what he said, but I said "yes," and so she got the job.

LEFT Caricature of John Severin by Marie from the 1953 EC Christmas party. **RIGHT** A 1949 Christmas card featuring the Severin siblings, both reflecting Marie's sense of humor.

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HORROR

All comics are not created equal, and horror, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. But *Tales From The Crypt* was not just another comic book. Nor was EC just another comic book company. And as Marie Severin found out, it was a great place to start a career.

time period, including titles like *Tales From the Crypt*, *Weird Science Fiction*, and *Frontline Combat*. And into that testosterone laden environment came a young lady named Marie Severin.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: *How did you get the job at EC?*

Severin: Well, it all started when Harvey started doing the war books, and he was such a perfectionist, and my brother also loved that uniforms were correct, and insignia, and all that jazz. So he said, "Well, my sister is talented, she could probably do the coloring." At that time the color was sent, with the art, up to Chemical Color Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and they had separators there that separated all the work that came in from Marvel or DC or whoever, and they did the coloring, and so forth. But, a lot of times [it was] not talented people doing it, and they might put green suits and yellow sidewalks, stuff like that, that was plentiful and was typical of comics. EC wanted it more accurate. Harvey was a stickler for having it realistic and upgrading the look of the books. He wanted them to look more like Prince Valiant in the newspaper. Anyway, that's how I got started, because they figured I could handle that, and I started on Harvey's books. So I quit my job and started doing coloring for them.

Cassell: *Were you coloring every book that came out of EC?*

Severin: At one time... Yeah, I guess I did. I mean, it didn't take me long. A lot of the stories were only five, seven pages, so when they'd come in, I'd immediately get the simple things. I'd color them up while I was in the office. So it was staggered. In other words, when a book was completed, in its stages, he may have different artists doing different stories. Yeah, I was doing a heck of a lot of the coloring. All the covers at that point, too, and that's the way they saw that the EC books would stand out on the counters because the coloring was good enough. The art in those days in so many comics, stacked up and all you saw was the top, was the title. But then they started putting them on racks where you could see the picture, and that's what they wanted to show off, our covers with a little more detail in the coloring. And the good art.

Cassell: *I know you've been credited with a lot of the success of EC because of those really vibrant covers.*

Severin: Well, it's the content that's the thing. I mean, you can color Daffy Duck and it won't make a difference as long as

EC

IT IS OFTEN SMALL things that end up having a big impact. So it was with EC. Maxwell Charles Gaines was not new to the comic book business. As a salesman for Eastern Color Printing, he came up with the idea of repackaging newspaper comic strips into a comic book format to sell to companies as a promotional item. Together with Jack Lebowitz, he became publisher of All-American Publications, which began publishing comics with original material in 1938, including in its stable characters like Wonder Woman and the Flash. Then, in 1944, Gaines sold All-American to Harry Donenfeld, who merged it with his own company, National Allied Publications, the precursor to DC Comics. With the proceeds of the sale of All-American, Gaines founded Educational Comics. EC started out much like its competitors, publishing comics with funny animals and titles like *Tiny Tot Comics*. However, Gaines also published comics that were truly educational, like *Picture Stories From the Bible*. Tragically, Max Gaines was killed in a boating accident in 1947, leaving the reins of EC to his 25 year old son, Bill.

Bill didn't particularly like the comics EC had been publishing and set out to make his own mark. Bill changed the name to Entertaining Comics, foregoing any pretense of the comics being educational, and he recruited a couple of brilliant creators to pave the way for a new EC, Harvey Kurtzman and Al Feldstein. Serving as editors, writers, and artists, Kurtzman and Feldstein formed the backbone of a remarkably talented

stable that included Jack Davis, Jack Kamen, Johnny Craig, Bernard Krigstein, Graham Ingles, Wally Wood, George Evans, John Severin and others. From that cadre came arguably the best comics of that or any other

FACING PAGE Color guide to the cover of *Haunt of Fear* #26 by Marie for the Russ Cochran reprints. Courtesy of Scott Burnley.

the freedom that Bill gave him. Also, Bill contributed a lot. You know, they started together, story and script.

Cassell: *So the artists, did they do their own inking?*

Severin: Yeah. I don't think they had much penciler and then inker. I think it was mostly they did their own thing. Some did. My brother—he worked with Elder, too, that's right. But then they split. And Davis, I know, did his own stuff. Being on the peripheral, I wasn't in on the whole production early on, so I don't remember or know if they felt that had to stop for approval. I think they might have just brought it in, and then they looked at the finished product and made any changes which probably were minimal because the guys were so great, but I think it was the finished product. They usually liked to have the lettering done first, only because you don't want the tails to be moving and everything where they should be.

Cassell: *I actually saw a story one time that Dick Giordano worked on where it had been inked before it was lettered, and there were huge gaps in the artwork because when it was lettered, it didn't take up nearly as much space as they thought it would.*

Severin: Well, see, that's why it's bad. That's why most of the time what the artist should do, when he gets the script, is pencil in the dialogue. They did that in the early days. And then they would pencil in the artwork and place the balloons with the tails missing and you'd just begin to do the artwork. But there were different methods. In the early stages, I think a lot of it was lettered beforehand.

Cassell: *So, when the finished artwork would come in to EC, then they made a "silver print"?*

Severin: What happened was, they would send it up to Chemical, and Chemical would make these silver prints and send them back, and I would color them. But then, when things got late, we started using a local Photostat guy. And I didn't like coloring on Photostat paper, but sometimes you had to. But then they started the Xerox machines, which was marvelous, because that paper was fine for coloring.

Cassell: *Was silver print heavier paper?*

Severin: Yeah, it was. I don't know why. It must have been because of what came through the machine up there that they duplicated... it was slightly thicker, a different surface. Whatever the composition was, you could color it, but I preferred when we were able to do it and put it in the Xerox machine and get regular bond paper to color, because the colors were easier to lay on. Sometimes they would come in, and they might have coating on one point in the printer when it was done at Chemical, and the color would take up where the print was. It happened rarely, but it was annoying. But it was much better when we were able to use it on bond paper and make copies on bond paper. The colors stuck, and would separate to be discernible.

Cassell: *And you did the coloring with watercolors?*

Severin: Yeah, Doctor Martens synchronomatic dyes. I had two huge coloring sets. But the colors were magnificent. You hardly had to mix anything on the palette except the flesh tones, so I would make a whole bottle of flesh tones and stick that in the color set. And I always loved it, because you had about

five shades of brown, from van Dyke brown into yellow ochre. It had oranges. Cerulean blue was the blue I wanted then for everything. If you were having a real midnight sky, you had all kinds of nice Prussian blue. It's a gorgeous color set. You can do anything with it. Watercolors are so easy to work with.

Cassell: *And then I gather there was some kind of codes or something that were associated with each different color so that the printer would know what to do.*

Severin: Well, now, it's different. Now they have all kinds of shading and percentages. But in those days it was 25%, 50%, and 100% of each color. So you had three primaries, yellow, red, and blue, and then you had three selections, and the overprinting on each of that gave you... I forget the number now, but you had that multiplication of the colors you could use. And it's just thinking wisely in doing it. Like, if you have a guy in a brown uniform, you'd try to use a hot color of brown and a dark color in the background. It could be brown, it could

From upper left) Margaret Severin (wife of John), Marie, and Toni Craig (wife of Johnny) in this 1950s photo taken in the Severin home. *Courtesy of Bill Leach.*





be purple, depending on the time of day. That's why I used overlays sometimes, not because I was trying to save time, but because sometimes it saved the art—you could see the artwork. Like, if it was a charging bunch of guys running at you, and Jack Davis would put in every doggone thing going on, you might color the charging guys coming from the background blue, and I'd color them yellow so you can see what's going on. And also it's thematic. Because that was the kind of thinking they appreciated, you know? Rather than trying to color the first guy in line in uniform, and then it's so tiny, and if you would get off-register, which in those days, because it was done with a primitive printing process, you'd get off-register and it'd be terrible. That's why most everybody had blue eyes. People don't realize we did that because, if they had brown eyes and it was off-register, you'd have blue coming out of the iris, and on the other side yellow, and that...[laughs] Everybody has blue eyes, or just black dots for the eyes. They liked to save me the trouble, but you had close-ups, or somebody would forget, and they would give you an open eyeball there, for example. So a lot of times you'd rather just have blue and have that blue off-register than to have three colors off-register.

Cassell: *I've never noticed that. I'll have to go back and look.*

Severin: Well, in the old books, sometimes the register was off. It was a cheap process in the early days, so a lot of times things got off-center. You would see it sometimes glaringly, and then whole books would go by and everything was fine, but every once in a while something would pop out. So that's what you tried to avoid, because it ruined the whole thing for a story. You're reading and all of a sudden everybody's off-center. It's disconcerting for the reader, and as young as they might be, they would be annoyed at the off-register coloring. They'd rather read it black-and-white than have the colors sloppy. They were pretty good about that, on the whole. It didn't happen that often.

Cassell: *The story has it that, on occasion, if you were coloring a book and felt like maybe a particular scene was a little too gory, maybe it might get colored a little more darkly than normal.*

Severin: Well, people have said that. I would never assume an editorial position. What I would do very often is, if somebody was being dismembered, I would rather color it in yellow

because it's garish, and also you could see what was going on. Or red, for the blood element, but not to subdue the artwork. If it was too complicated with these gory scenes, I'd rather put one color on it because, number one, you can see more, and if you start coloring every detail of the knife throwing, the blood flowing, the shirt being ripped, all of a sudden, if it's off-register, you get a mucky panel. It's all messed up. Well, the whole page would be messed up. Frankly, I'd rather color with solids for, like, a murder scene, and yellow so you can see everything. I wasn't trying to hide it. I mean, the main reason these people were buying these books was to see somebody's head cut off, y'know? Lose fingers and everything.

Cassell: *Once you prepared the color guides for the books and the covers, did they also have to be approved by Feldstein or somebody?*

Severin: Oh, sure! I would always pass everything in, whether they even looked at it after a while, but I think they probably sifted through it. They trusted me because I really wanted to succeed, because it was my job, y'know? A lot of people don't realize, if you do a good job, you have a job. And they trusted me with a lot of stuff. They knew that I wouldn't subdue artwork, I would just kind of shield it a little bit so if a parent picked up the book in the drug store, they wouldn't see that somebody's stomach was all red. And it worked. Nobody complained.

Cassell: *It's true. Until they got to Fredric Wertham.*

Severin: Oh, no. I mean, the man was trying to make a job for himself.

Cassell: *That's true.*

Severin: And everybody knew it. It was nonsense. It was a comic book. It was, what do they call it, the blink of an eye? It was kidding. We weren't telling kids how to kill their mother or anything. Not directly, anyway.

Cassell: *So was it Kurtzman who actually hired you?*

Severin: What happened was, I was going to art school a little bit, and I was working down on Wall Street, just a job, making some money, and feeling my way. And Johnny said, "Y'know, Marie, Harvey Kurtzman is up on doing these war books and stuff. He's very unhappy with Chemical Color. They color the



HEROES

Super-heroes had enjoyed tremendous popularity since 1938 and the introduction of Superman in the first issue of *Action Comics*. Their popularity waned following the end of World War II, and the heroes took a backseat to horror and crime comics. But the Comics Code that brought an end to EC and other publishers in the mid-1950s opened up the door for the return of the super-hero. The publication of *Showcase #4* in 1956 is widely regarded as the beginning of the Silver Age of Comics. It featured an updated version of the Golden Age Flash, re-envisioned by DC Comics editor Julie Schwartz, and the super-hero was once again on the rise.

Drawing super-hero comics is a skill, however, that not every artist possesses. Many artists who demonstrated exceptional ability in other genres floundered when trying to draw men in tights. The challenge is to make them look exciting and yet credible while flying around and clobbering fanatical costumed bad guys. This was especially true as older readers, many of them college students, joined the ranks of comic fandom. No small feat, and yet one that Marie Severin mastered with seeming ease.

Marie drew a variety of heroes over the years. She is most closely identified with the Incredible Hulk, Sub-Mariner, and Doctor Strange, but she also drew characters like the Cat as well as Kull the Conqueror, with her brother John. Her tenure is regarded as a high water mark for each of them. What they all have in common is that they are characters of Marvel Comics, the company with which Marie would remain for thirty years.

MARVEL COMICS

WHEN MARIE RETURNED TO the company once known as Timely/Atlas, things were already in full swing. The combined creative genius of writer Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and others, had produced a succession of successful new super-hero comic books, based on a new concept—the notion

that a super-hero could have problems, just like everyone else. The Thing wasn't happy about his powers and he often argued with Mr. Fantastic, who was trying to cure him, and the Human Torch, who loved to tease him. Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker, struggled with guilt over causing the death of his uncle, while trying to go to school and hold down a job (with a boss who hated his other identity.) Sure, the Flash was often late to work or to meet Iris, but that irony did not compare with the pathos of the heroes in the burgeoning Marvel Universe. Marvel humanized the super-hero without diminishing their powers. And they did it with snappy dialogue and dynamic artwork that captivated a new generation of readers.

Over the years, Marie played a variety of roles at Marvel Comics, from production and coloring to penciling and inking (and even lettering on occasion) to art director and special projects. In this interview, Marie talks about her return to Marvel Comics and many of the people she worked with along the way.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: *So you eventually left Filmfax and went back to work for Stan?*

Severin: Yeah, I guess I did. Anyway, I was back with Stan.

Cassell: *Who was there when you went back the second time?*

Severin: Well, pretty much the same crew. John and I. When I went back, I think Maneely had died by then, and John was freelancing because he was well-established with his characters, and he was doing fine. He lived in Jersey, so he didn't have to commute anymore, which was nice. I lived in Brooklyn at the time, in the old homestead. I really was reared from the same area, so there was no change for me.

Cassell: *Was Don Heck there?*

Severin: Gee, I don't think so. I think he was freelance, and these guys would be [working] outside. In the bullpen, you didn't see them going in and out of Stan's office, and they usually did not have the occasion to come back and talk to the production people unless one of the artists wanted to see one of the artists that happened to be working there that day. Sometimes they'd come in and they'd give them a table to

finish some changes and stuff that Stan wanted, or if they were on staff, some guy might come back and say, "Hey, let's have lunch." For the most part, I didn't have lunch with the guys. Remember, I was younger, and the guys wanted to be with the guys. And I wasn't doing any artwork at the time, I was in production. And sketches and stuff like that. But it was the guys.

Cassell: *What about Romita? When did he come in?*

Severin: I don't know. I think he was doing freelance all this time, but I probably, if I saw him, it might have been passing him in the hall. This is before I went on the staff later on, where he and I worked in the same room for a couple years. But I didn't really meet him until, geez, when Stan was at 635 Madison. Well, I met him later on, and then he came on staff. And then we were in the same room, and then they moved us to another building, and then all the artists were in the same room. Herb Trimpe came along. I guess Danny Crespi was still around. Artie Simek was in the old bullpen, too. That was the one before. He was a funny guy.

Cassell: *So what was it like? You must have been there when Marvel was coming up with the beginnings of the super-heroes, right?*

Severin: Well, not at first [at Timely]. I remember one of the VPs came in and said, "Why don't we revive the Sub-Mariner?" And they thought it was too old-fashioned. They were doing mostly crime and funny books and stuff. It was later [at Marvel]. I wasn't there when Stan really got the super-heroes going. I think he claimed that it was almost a lark to do the *Fantastic Four*. "Hey, we can put something like this out, let's see if it works." And it worked. And when I came back, the super-heroes were just taking off. All the characters Stan was developing. They brought the Sub-Mariner back, and Iron Man, Daredevil, Spider-Man. I was there a little while, and Ditko left,

and it was devastating because everybody liked his Spider-Man so much. And poor Romita had to follow that. But his stuff really took off, and it's his Spider-Man representing Marvel in later years. And that was almost like the company trademark, y'know? Poor Romita was such a perfectionist, though, that he wasn't as fast as the other guys. But the other guys were used to making up fast stuff, and Romita was doing a wonderful job. And it was great, it was just constant attention to put the book out because he did such a good job.

Cassell: *Tell me about Steve Ditko. What was he like?*

Severin: I have no idea because I only met him at a party at Roy's house. I would see him when he came in. I've spoken to him on the phone maybe three times. I had no reason to know him or deal with him directly, because he was phasing himself out at that time. But, also, the short time that I was there, I didn't have occasion to have any dealings [with him]. He was just considered so bloody talented, it was marvelous, and then when he left, Stan really felt bad.

Cassell: *I take it he and Stan just had irreconcilable differences?*

Severin: Yeah, something. I really don't know, because I didn't want to be nosy, and Ditko, he is different from most of us, in that he doesn't take advantage of people. He could do artwork and sell pages for thousands of dollars, and he just doesn't do it. It's sad. I think he could be pretty well off if he wanted to. But he has something about the comics, and nobody has ever explained it to me. Just one of the mysteries.

Cassell: *I understand that, during the early days at Marvel, there were some guys like Don Heck—*

Severin: Oh, yeah. He was good. Very reliable, very nice.

Cassell: *That Stan would come to if something got behind schedule, or somebody missed a deadline,*



1969 Merry Marvel Marching Society promotional piece by Marie. Courtesy of Jon B. Cooke.

PRODUCTION AND COLORING DEPARTMENTS

THE POPULAR NOTION OF a Marvel “bullpen,” which the company went to great lengths to propagate in the Sixties and Seventies, was largely a myth. The majority of artists and many writers worked out of private studios or their own homes, and most of them worked on a freelance basis. The actual number of Marvel employees working in the office was limited, among other things, because of space constraints. The real bullpen was comprised primarily of editorial and production staff, including colorists. Marie Severin was one of the few who worked in the Marvel bullpen.

PRODUCTION

THE PRODUCTION DEPARTMENT OF a comic book publisher is responsible for handling the logistics associated with the production of the comic books, including corrections. Since most of the artists drawing the stories did not work in the office, it usually made it impractical to return the artwork to the original artist for corrections. In most cases, that would have resulted in a missed deadline to the printer. So, if corrections were required, the responsibility typically fell to the production department. For years, John Romita and John Verpoorten were key members of the production staff for Marvel, as was Marie.

Corrections to covers were fairly common. If the cover art did not precisely fit, a photostat copy would be made and the “stat” was then cropped or the artwork extended to fill in the available space or accommodate a comic book logo. Also, when an editor reviewed the artwork returned from an inker, there might be certain characters or whole panels that would need to be redrawn. In such cases, the goal of the production staff would be to mimic the style of the original artist.

Marie Severin was frequently called upon to make last-minute corrections to artwork to enable Marvel to meet their printing deadlines. Sometimes, the corrections are even more extreme. Occasionally, artwork would be damaged or lost in the mail and have to be recreated. It is fun to try to spot the instances in which an artist’s work was supplemented by Marie. However, she was sufficiently adept at imitating the style of other artists; something easier said than done. One example is *Incredible Hulk Annual* #1, where she is thought to have redone the face of the Hulk on the famous Jim Steranko cover.

While working in the Marvel production department, Marie was also called upon to support several special projects. *Esquire* was a slick tabloid-size men’s magazine that featured articles about men’s fashion, celebrities, politics, sports, and fiction by classic and new writers. The September 1966 issue of *Esquire* featured a series of articles about the military draft (and how to avoid it) including a sample of the student draft deferment test. Included in the feature were two articles about the growing

popularity of Marvel comic books among college students and professors, with illustrations of Marvel heroes by Jack Kirby. The feature also included unique illustrations by Marie Severin for articles about “Super-Students” and “Super-Prof,” drawn like super-heroes, as well as a humorous anatomical depiction of a “Draft Reject.” Although the articles illustrated by Marie did not have anything to do with Marvel Comics, *Esquire* apparently asked Marvel to help illustrate them and Marie was tapped to do it. Her adept handling of the assignment reportedly earned her the penciling job on *Strange Tales*.

Former Marvel editor and writer, Roy Thomas, speculates on what may have led Marie to get the *Esquire* assignment, “Maybe somebody saw her art while they were there and hired her to do it, because I don’t think she went out looking for work like that. It was probably the *Esquire* reporter, maybe they were looking for somebody and asked about it. Somebody would have mentioned Marie if they were looking for humor art for two reasons. One is, she was good at it; and, two, she could kind of be spared a little bit more. Stan wouldn’t have wanted them to go to Jack Kirby for something. It would have taken his time away from the main book, and at that time Marie still wasn’t doing anything like that, so she could be spared a little from her production work to do something like that, where Stan wouldn’t have liked Jack Kirby spending too much time on that, even for the publicity angle. Then again, they made a good choice when they got Marie to do it.”

The illustrations in the 1966 *Esquire* issue may represent Marie’s first published artwork upon returning to Marvel, but they were just the beginning of a long association with special projects. Marie returned to the pages of *Esquire* in October 1969 to illustrate



The Marvel Comics Bullpen celebrates Dave Cockrum’s birthday. (From left) Marie, Linda Orola, Steve Grant, Hellen Katz (back to camera), and Mark Gruenwald (behind Hellen). Copyright © 2012 Eliot R. Brown. Used With Permission.

several articles about Joe Namath (which had nothing to do with Marvel Comics) as well as the cover to that issue. Marie's talent for caricature and sense of humor shine through in the depiction of the legendary Jets quarterback standing atop the Empire State Building like King Kong, a girl in one hand (of course) and a football in the other. (For more information about Marie's work on Special Projects, see the Humor section.)



COLORING

COLORING IS ONE OF those aspects of comic books that we have a tendency to take for granted. But when you have seen a comic book that was well drawn, but poorly colored, you realize it can detract from the overall appeal of the art and even potentially impact sales, if the problem persists. With Marie's exceptional background in coloring, garnered through her years at EC, it is no surprise that Marvel would want to take advantage of her talents in that regard. Throughout her tenure at Marvel, Marie colored a number of comics that she drew, such as *Not Brand Echh*, as well as many others she was not otherwise involved in, including the fantasy magazine *Epic Illustrated*. She had a keen understanding of not only what colors would look good, but also what would reproduce well. For a time, Marie even served as head of the coloring department at Marvel, providing guidance to the colorists and ensuring a measure of quality and consistency in the look and feel of Marvel comics.



MARIE TALKS BRIEFLY HERE about coloring at Marvel. (For more detailed discussions about coloring, see the interview with Marie in the Horror section and the interview with David Anthony Kraft in the Humor section.)

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: *You were the head of the Marvel coloring department at one time, right?*

Severin: Which meant nothing.

Cassell: *[laughs] No raise came with that, huh?*

Severin: No. And, also, it was just, "She's supposed to know more about coloring than anybody, so give her the title so we can carry that in the book. 'Marie Severin? It must be good.'" Most of the time, I didn't even see the stuff. It was a bunch of baloney. Now, some things they were really concerned about, like selling a character or something, they'd want me to have an input, because I'd always give them an honest opinion or fix it up better than it was because I know more than they did about color. I'd been doing it for twenty years or so. But those guys would want to do things, and I'd tell them, it looks great

Not All Your Supermen Are in the Funnies. Meet Super-Student!

Eight super-collegians! Heroes! Villains! They can crush buildings, overthrow deans, terrify faculties!



Marie illustrates an article about "Super-Students" in the September 1966 issue of *Esquire* magazine.

in real color, but you don't know what the combination is going to look like, and I do. You can't have those colors together on a cover, it'll look hokey. I wouldn't change it drastically, I would just change it so you could see what was going on. That was the whole purpose. But some editors think they wanted their wives, or they wanted to color it. Some of the artists colored it. But then they realized it didn't pay that much anyway, so why bother? A couple of bucks a page at the time. Holy mackerel. In the old days, they did the color up in Bristol, Connecticut. They'd send the book, and they'd do the coloring, and they wouldn't see the color until the book came out. And they put a stop to that because they thought they had books that were winners and the wanted the stuff to look good and establish a real quality, and so that's when they started being picky. So I was sticking my nose in, too, because that was my job. That's okay.

Cassell: *What do you think of comic book coloring today?*

Severin: I think the color is much better today than it used to be, although I think it's overdone now with this rendering, for heaven's sakes. They have some pages I have seen—now, I haven't seen a comic in a month or two, but sometimes they'd over-render. They'd have these fantastic skies. You're reading the page, you're finished with it in a minute. I mean, just have it look good, and if you want to look back at an action scene, it should look good, but they were coloring like it was going to hang in the Louvre, y'know?

Some characters become very closely associated with the artist that drew them. So it was with the Master of the Mystic Arts, Doctor Strange. Steve Ditko and Stan Lee originated the character in 1963 in the pages of the split book *Strange Tales*, sharing the title initially with the Human Torch and later with Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.

By way of explanation, “split books” were comics in which two recurring characters appeared in separate stories in each issue, typically around ten pages each. It was a way of essentially combining two comic books into one. The need for split books arose in the 1960s when Marvel was limited by its distributor to eight titles a month. Split books during this time period included *Tales to Astonish*, with Sub-Mariner and the Hulk; *Tales of Suspense*, with Captain America and Iron Man; and *Strange Tales*, with Doctor Strange and Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.

When Ditko left *Strange Tales* with issue #146, he left big shoes to fill. Bill Everett filled in for a half dozen issues, and then that challenge fell to Marie Severin.

DOCTOR STRANGE

DOCTOR STEPHEN STRANGE WAS a gifted, but arrogant, surgeon who was in a car accident that left his hands with nerve damage. Unwilling to accept a role as a consultant, he sought a cure from every quarter. Strange traveled to Tibet to the palace of the Ancient One, but became frustrated when the mystic would not cure him. While there, though, Strange witnessed an attack on the Ancient One by his pupil Mordo. Mordo prevented Strange from warning his master, which prompted Strange to decide to learn the mystic arts himself. He became a disciple of the Ancient One and, ultimately, the Sorcerer Supreme.

In issue #153 of *Strange Tales*, Marie Severin penciled and inked Doctor Strange in battle against Umar and the Mindless Ones to free Clea, the love of his life, from a mystical prison. The website www.comics.org notes that the first Doctor Strange story drawn by Marie was “much cruder than subsequent episodes; the roughness of the linework suggests she may have replaced Bill Everett very close to deadline.”

With the subsequent issue, Marie began to illustrate the Doctor Strange covers as well, which alternated with covers featuring Nick Fury. The story continues from the previous issue, with Strange getting help from Veritas, the “Embodiment of Truth Incarnate” to reach Umar’s castle. In the following issue, seeking help from the Ancient One, Strange takes the battle with Umar to Earth. Unlike the one- or two-part Hulk

2000 Commission
drawing of Doctor
Strange by Marie.

stories in *Tales to Astonish*, these Doctor Strange stories illustrated by Marie were part of a 22-issue arc. Marie continued with Doctor Strange through issue #160 of *Strange Tales*, illustrating conflicts with Zom, a powerful being imprisoned by Eternity, the Living Tribunal, and finally Baron Mordo himself, former pupil of the Ancient One. As the Doctor Strange storyline progressed, so did Marie’s drawing. Marie is also credited with co-plotting these stories with writers Stan

Lee and Roy Thomas.

One of the most captivating aspects of the Doctor Strange stories are the bizarre settings in which the stories take place, as well as the flourishing spells that are cast. The tenor was set by Ditko in the earliest appearances of Doctor Strange, and subsequent artists, including Marie, tried to do justice to the mystical mood of the stories. It is no wonder, though, that some fans thought Doctor Strange was on drugs (or that the stories represented some kind of hallucinogenic trip).

Marie’s last issue of *Strange Tales* was in 1967, but she returned briefly to the character in 1995 when she penciled two issues of *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*. In this short exchange, Marie talks about her experience with Doctor Strange.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: Did you replace Ditko, then, on Doctor Strange?

Severin: Yeah, they had to have somebody, and they said, “try it,” because it wasn’t a big... It wasn’t a *Spider-Man*, you know?





Doctor Strange and his nemesis Baron Mordo in this page from *Strange Tales* #160. Courtesy of Sean Clarke.

And they wanted somebody to try it, so I did, and I liked it. I could bounce into anything, you know, and do it, say, 70% as well as the previous guy, and I could fill in on stuff because I could juggle my technique a little bit. And I could tell stories. I know Roy appreciated that when he came along. He was fun to work with, too.

Cassell: So did you enjoy drawing Doctor Strange?

Severin: Yeah. But you had a free rein with these wacky backgrounds, y'know? You could do all this weird stuff. And I always put in to color my own stuff, so when I was drawing it, I was thinking, "Ah, I'll put that in and then that'll be real wacky, with something crazy." And I always tried to color my own stuff. I think it looked better.

Most fans would agree that Marie rose to the challenge of Doctor Strange. Her original artwork from the series is prized by collectors. Marie was succeeded on the book by Dan Adkins, but she was not finished with drawing Marvel heroes.

ONE OF THE OTHER artists at Marvel who had a distinguished run illustrating Doctor Strange was Gene "The Dean" Colan. Colan followed Adkins as the artist for *Doctor Strange* with issue #172 of his solo title. Here, Colan talks briefly about Marie.

(Note: The brevity and chopiness of this interview is due to a technical problem that was not discovered until it was too late to remedy. Rest assured that, if it is not already clear, Colan was a big fan of Marie's and had tremendous respect for her, both as an artist and a person.)



Photo of Gene Colan from the 1975 Mighty Marvel Comic Convention program.

INTERVIEW WITH GENE COLAN

Dewey Cassell: When you came back to work for Marvel in the mid-1960s, was Marie there?

Gene Colan: As far as I can remember. Marie worked for EC also. That's where Harvey Kurtzman [was editor]. John was there. Bill Elder was there. Jack Davis was there. I tried to get into that circle ... I literally [begged Harvey for a chance] ... I put my heart and soul into it.

[Note: Gene's one and only EC story was called "Wake!" and appeared in *Two-Fisted Tales* #30 in 1952.]

Cassell: Marie used to design a lot of the Marvel covers. Did she design any of your covers?

Colan: Could have.

Cassell: Did you enjoy working on the humor stuff like Not Brand Echh?

Colan: I loved it. I really did.

Cassell: What do you think of Marie's artistic style?

Colan: A great cartoonist. I really admired her. She was a good artist, good attitude.

Cassell: What did you think of Marie as a person?

Colan: She was always happy go lucky. Always with a joke. Loved to laugh. I feel bad because I [lost touch with her]. She was strong technically. She had a wonderful sense of humor. She was a wonderful person.

Next to Spider-man, the Hulk may be the most widely recognized Marvel character, thanks in part to a successful television series starring Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno, as well as countless appearances in advertising. One of the Marvel Comics characters with which Marie is most closely associated is the Incredible Hulk.

THE INCREDIBLE HULK

AS THE STORY GOES, physicist Doctor Bruce Banner was testing a new gamma bomb for the military when a teenager named Rick Jones drove onto the testing grounds. Banner ran out to warn the youth and managed to get him to safety, but was caught in the blast of the gamma bomb himself. He awoke later to find that he had survived the explosion, but learned that now when he was agitated, he would transform into a huge, green creature nicknamed the "Hulk." The Hulk felt animosity toward the military, who tried repeatedly to capture him, and he was often the victim of some super-villain who had plans to harness his strength, but the Hulk was generally harmless to others and often came to their aid. A sympathetic anti-hero.

Success did not come easily or quickly to the Incredible Hulk. The Hulk was actually the second new "super-hero" character introduced by Marvel Comics in the early 1960s, following the success of *The Fantastic Four*. The jade giant first appeared in *The Incredible Hulk* #1 in 1962, drawn by Jack Kirby, but the title only lasted six issues before being canceled due to disappointing sales. Lee still had high hopes for the character, though, and brought him back a year and a half later alongside Giant Man in issue # 59 of the split-book *Tales to Astonish*. This time, the Hulk fared better and he remained with the title, while Giant Man was replaced with the Sub-Mariner in issue #70. The early appearances of the Hulk in *Tales to Astonish* were illustrated by Steve Ditko, who was later succeeded by Jack Kirby and then Gil Kane.

Marie began drawing the Hulk in 1967 with issue # 92 of *Tales to Astonish*. It was her second regular penciling assignment at Marvel, picking up where Kane left off. The Hulk stories in *Tales to Astonish* were written by Stan Lee and included battles against the Silver Surfer, the High Evolutionary and his New Men, the Lord of the Lightning, the Sub-Mariner and Loki. Marie's pencils in these Hulk stories were very detailed and faithfully inked by Frank Giacoia and Herb Trimpe, who would later become the primary artist on the Hulk himself. Marie also drew the covers for every other issue. (The covers alternated between lead characters on the split books.)

Issue #101 of *Tales to Astonish* would be its last. Freed from the distribution constraints that limited Marvel's

output, the characters in the split books were each given their own titles, but continued the numbering from their most recent appearance. Consequently, the first issue of *The Incredible Hulk* was numbered 102. Marie continued to draw the Hulk in his solo book, but the full length stories were written by Gary Friedrich and inked by Giacoia and George Tuska, with Stan credited as editor. Issue #102 continued the battle with the Asgardians, followed in subsequent issues by conflicts with the

Space Parasite, the Rhino, and the Missing Link, interspersed with angst from Betty Ross, would-be love interest of Bruce Banner, and attempts by her father, General Thunderbolt Ross, to destroy the Hulk. What the foes of the Hulk may have lacked in originality during this time period was made up for by the dramatic action sequences.

What was noteworthy about these issues was the appearance of a technique that Marie would employ repeatedly over the years to great effect—the transformation panel. Typically in a single long panel or series of connected horizontal panels, Marie would illustrate the transformation of a character from one state to another—in this case from Bruce Banner to the Hulk (or vice versa). This technique conveyed, much more effectively than



Marie Severin splash page to *Tales to Astonish* #94 featuring the Hulk. Courtesy Heritage Auctions.

separate, individual panels, the connection of the two aspects of the character, as well as the agony involved in the transformation.

Issue #106 marked a transition for the Hulk, as Marie did the breakdowns for Herb Trimpe to pencil. With the following issue, Trimpe assumed the regular penciling chores on the book. Marie continued to draw the covers through issue #108. It is worth noting that one of Trimpe's best inkers during his tenure with the Hulk was Marie's brother John Severin. Marie returned to draw *The Incredible Hulk Annual* #1, featuring a tale of the Hulk with Black Bolt and the Inhumans. She also finished Trimpe's layouts in issue #190 of *The Incredible Hulk*, and inked other artist's pencils in a dozen issues in the late 1980s, beginning with #354. In addition, Marie did spot illustrations for text articles in the *Rampaging Hulk* black-and-white magazine. (See also the discussion about Sketch Cards in the section Home Again.)

Marie and Herb Trimpe made a great team. About his former partner on the Hulk, Trimpe said, "Marie is a treasure of experience and talent in this business—an icon and a cornerstone of the edifice we call comic books."

The enduring popularity of the Hulk can be attributed in part to his inability to control his circumstances and the fact that so few people truly understand him, a condition that many people—especially youth—can easily relate to. Marie did an outstanding job of making the character both powerful and likable at the same time.

Marie talks briefly about her experience with the Incredible Hulk.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: So what about the Hulk? Did you enjoy drawing the Hulk?

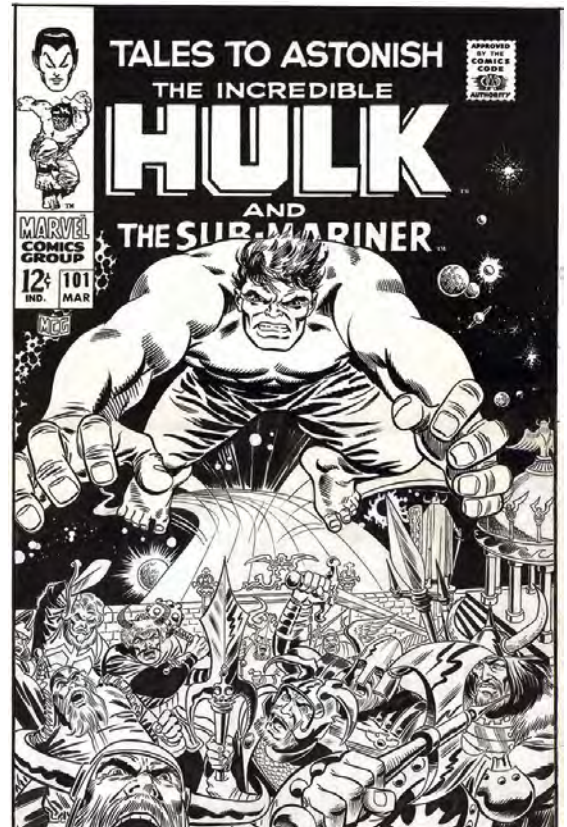
Severin: Oh, yeah. That was fun. When I see the Hulk today, oh, they make him so nasty! I always thought of him as, he wrecked everything, but he really didn't know what the heck he was doing. I thought, here goes the Hulk and bang, saves the [day], building comes down. Oh, my God. But it wasn't hateful. One of the fans sent me a book that they made recently of classic heads of the Hulk. He is so mean-looking! You have no sympathy for him whatsoever. I mean, maybe it's salable, but my thinking of the original Hulk is like, just, "I didn't mean that. Don't make me mad." But now it's rip 'em up, tear 'em up. There's no reasoning at all.

Cassell: Yeah, I'm like you, I don't care much for the new Hulk.

Severin: No. It's too vicious. But, listen, maybe today the kids want to see that. Who knows? I mean, it's a lot more violent today than it was in the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies, boy. The world has gotten to be completely all soulless.

In a June 20, 2003 article in the Pulse section of the *Home News Tribune*, Marie tells writer Mark Voger how she envisioned the Hulk, "I rather liked him looking more hard, with less hair, almost like a monster's. That's how I evolved it. It's the same sort of thing as 'Frankenstein'—just pure frustration. I think the poor guy was so frustrated, because most of the time he didn't know why he was such a mess. The monster thing always has appeal. 'Frankenstein' summed it up better than

LEFT Classic Marie Severin transformation panel from issue #106 of *The Incredible Hulk*.
RIGHT Unpublished version of the cover to *Tales to Astonish* #101 by Marie. *Courtesy of Stephen Moore.*



Marie didn't just illustrate the characters in the sequential stories. Regardless of her title, there is no denying the impact that Marie had in designing the covers of Marvel comic books.

MARVEL COVER PRELIMS

"MIRTHFUL" MARIE SEVERIN WORKED at Marvel Comics for many years, serving in a variety of roles, but in some respects, her greatest contribution to the Marvel Age of Comics was behind the scenes. For several years, from the late Sixties to early Seventies, Marie Severin designed virtually every cover that appeared on a Marvel comic book.

In this interview, Marie talks about her approach to designing the covers of Marvel comics.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE

Cassell: *There was a point in time in which Stan Lee had you doing mock-ups of the covers that Marvel Comics was putting out. Why was that?*

Severin: Well, if Sgt. Fury was going to be on a cover with a helicopter sequence or somebody jumping out of a helicopter, and unbeknownst to the editor or Stan, somebody else was writing a story about Daredevil or Spider-Man hanging off a helicopter, you could have two covers in the works and only discover it when they both came back and two of them might be about helicopters. They wanted to have a little more control on the design of the covers, so you wouldn't have subject duplication.

Cassell: *How did you get involved in designing the covers?*

Severin: I was very fast with design and sketches and the individual artists didn't have time to come in and do individual sketches. It was faster for Stan to say "no" to a design with somebody in the office doing them, rather than have the artist, say John Buscema, do a cover and Stan wouldn't like the layout or he thought the layout was too close to something else or he wanted a different expression (which, of course, John wasn't that annoying.) But I would have a variety because I knew what the rest of them looked like.

Cassell: *How did you keep track of all of the different covers?*

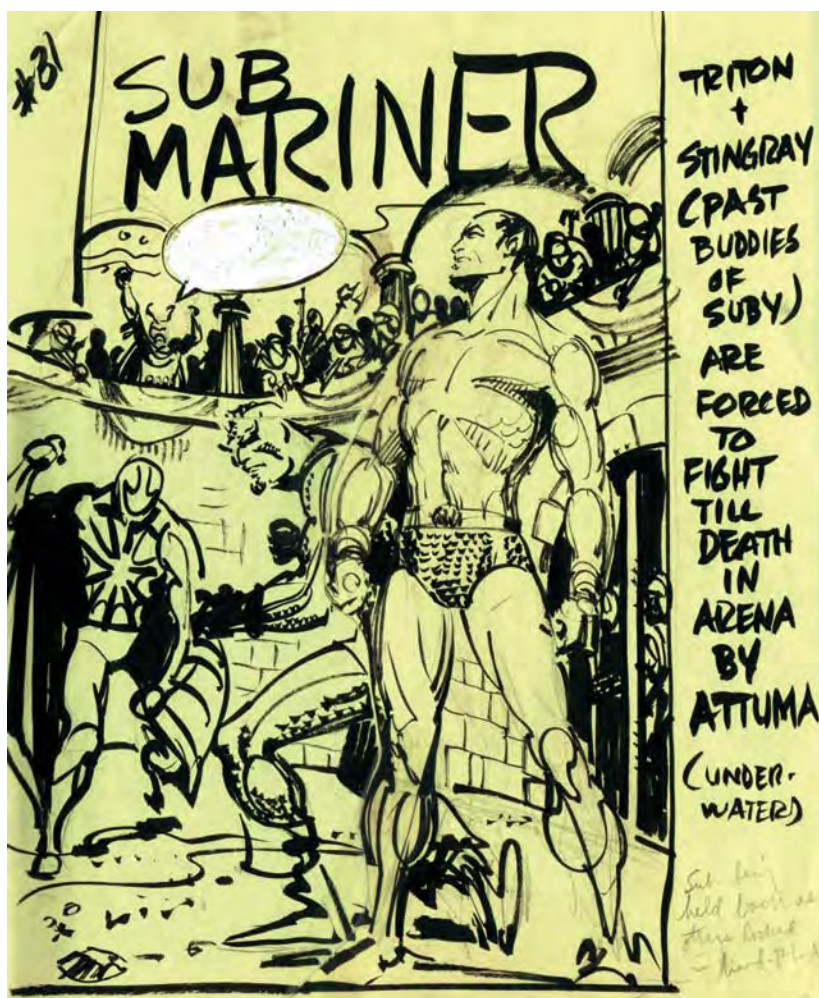
Severin: I started hanging up the cover sketches over the previous covers. I had a whole six months of covers hanging on the wall, of all the books, and I would look at what was coming out this month. "Okay, let's have a variety of that. Let's change that."

Cassell: *When you were doing the cover sketches, did you have anything to work from? Did you have the plot synopsis or any of the artwork?*

Severin: Yeah, you did. Sometimes I got the script, sometimes I got Xerox pages of the pencils half done or the whole story, but usually they wanted to get the cover in the works before the thing was inked and lettered. I really tried—Stan wanted it that way—that you would basically have the same thing on the cover that was going on inside. I used to hate it as a kid when sometimes the cover had nothing to do with the story inside. We tried to be basically accurate.

Cassell: *DC used to do that a lot. Their covers often had nothing to do with the story.*

Severin: Well, remember that they were bigger than we were. A lot of times, the stuff wasn't even in production and you had to put a cover on, so you can't blame them. They were



Preliminary cover to
Sub-Mariner #31 by Marie. Courtesy
of Ruben Espinosa.

trying to attract the readers to buy the book. Sometimes the story wasn't even written and they had the cover done.

Cassell: *The cover sketches were done on 8½" x 11" paper, frequently on the back of a piece of Marvel stationery. Why was that?*

Severin: Probably it was a good size to send out to the guys and it had the address on it and everything so the guys would know where it came from.

Cassell: *Some of the cover sketches were done in pen or marker, but others were done in ink and wash.*

Severin: As I recall, depending if you wanted to show a graveyard or nighttime scene, you would use the wash on there so the guys would get the idea. They didn't have to follow it if they didn't want, but it gave them the atmosphere that Stan wanted at the time.

Some of the cover sketches were fairly simple, but others reflected a tremendous amount of detail. A few were even done in watercolor. Marie typically drew a "corner box" in the upper left and allowed space on the right margin for notes, which might be instructions to the artist or a brief explanation of the scene depicted on the cover.

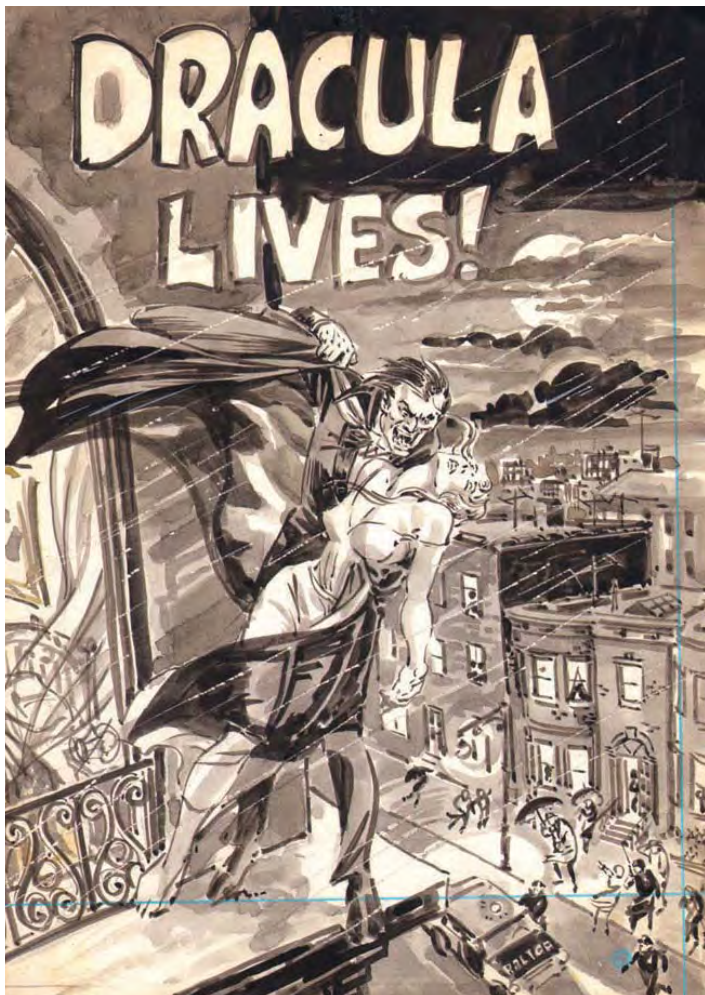
Cassell: *When you put together an idea for the cover, whom did it go to for approval?*

Severin: Stan, usually. Or the editors would do it, like Roy Thomas. Stan tried to, and succeeded in most cases, make sure he knew what was going to be printed. He might forget an hour later what you showed him, but when you showed him, his instincts were there.

Cassell: *Did you design all of the Marvel covers?*

Severin: For a certain length of time, I was doing most of them. You would have all this coming in and I was like a central point of it. I would file and Xerox it. At that time, we were pretty orderly with it and I would have a consensus of what the covers were. Not that my designs were always the best, but we would get it going. We had a starting point and a correction point. When my sketch was approved, they would send it out and the guy would do it and at least it would be roughly in the same design or subject matter that I had. John Romita, for instance, did his own. He was there, and he and Stan were doing *Spider-Man*, so I didn't have to worry about *Spider-Man*.

Cassell: *Who decided which artist would actually draw the cover?*



LEFT Preliminary cover to *Marvel Classics Comics* #9 (Dracula) by Marie. **RIGHT** Preliminary cover to issue #108 of *The Incredible Hulk* by Marie. Courtesy of Ruben Espinosa and Stephen Moore, respectively.

Severin: It wasn't just at random. For the most part, Stan had preferences for certain artists to do certain characters. Like, if it was *Daredevil*, whoever was on the book or Stan thought was good. If they weren't available, you could get somebody else to do it. Or, you know, he would have loved to have Kirby do them all.

Cassell: I noticed, for example, that your brother John frequently did western covers.

Severin: He drew horses so well. And also, he loved the cowboy bit. His drawings of that era—battles and equipment and guns—it just came so naturally to him. He loved the scenes, the backgrounds so much. More than, I think, most artists in comics did. Other artists might put a modern gun in a guy's hand, not realizing it. John was very, very accurate. If he knew it was April 1876, he had April 1876 backgrounds. John did not put just any old thing there.

Cassell: I also noticed that sometimes, when the finished cover was done, the artist might have kept the same general concept, but they might change the perspective, for example. Once the cover design was approved, did they still have some latitude?

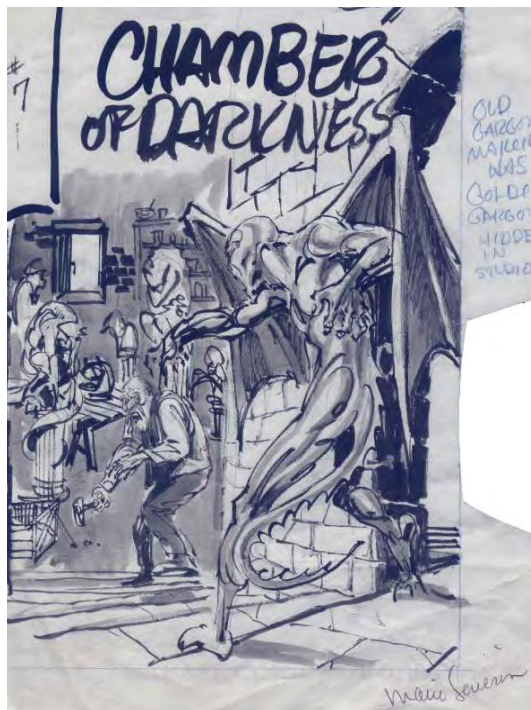
Severin: Oh, sure. That was okay. As I said, I was fast, and I could do up the idea and do the sketch, and then whoever the editor decided to give it to, they interpret what they want. Stan liked the idea of the design being basically under his control, but you could change the perspective or the background or whatever. Stan just liked to have an idea of what was going on. Sometimes, the artist might bring the cover in and the editor might even forget about the sketch that I did. It was probably not attached to the cover when it came back. If the editor or Stan didn't like the finished cover, he would have them change it. And I didn't interfere. It wasn't my place.

Cassell: I noticed that you did a cover sketch, even if you were going to do the finished cover.

Severin: Well, I still had to get it approved.

Cassell: I noticed there was an issue of *Tower of Shadows* where you did three or four sketches for the same cover?

Severin: Sometimes, Stan would drive me crazy. It might have been that Stan was being picky about



Preliminary cover to *Chamber of Darkness* #7 by Marie (left) and published version by Bernie Wrightson. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

stuff, or that the sales were down and they were more specific about what they were putting out there to get kids to buy it, and I would have to do a number of covers, even if it wasn't a bestseller book. Then, sometimes, I would do one sketch and Stan would say, "Fine." So it was your job. Even if you did twenty of them, that's what you're paid for.

Cassell: A lot of the cover sketches have issue numbers on them. Did you always know which issue it was going to be?

Severin: I think we knew beforehand, but wanted to make sure. I would pin these up on the wall and you wanted to make sure you were doing the right issue. Also, when the artist would send it in, you had these vouchers that you put the number on and you'd have all this trouble with bookkeeping if you didn't put the right issue number on the voucher. Once in a while, very rarely, Stan would say, "Let's use this for the next one and we'll switch the stories." So, you really wanted the artist to be aware of where the heck it was going.

Cassell: I also ran across a Captain America cover sketch that was apparently never used.

Severin: That could have happened. A lot of times, covers were rejected or the story wasn't that strong, so they switched to something else. Not every sketch that I did appeared. Or the stories had to be changed. A lot of times, Stan would say, "I don't like the ending of this" and they'd fool around with it, so the cover would be junked.

FACING PAGE FROM TOP LEFT Preliminary cover to *Sgt. Fury and the Howling Commandos Annual* #6 by Marie, along with the finished original art by John Severin and the published cover. Courtesy of Ruben Espinosa and Heritage Auctions, respectively.

THE FIRST LADY OF COMICS

Marie Severin did not set out to blaze any trails. She did what came naturally—drawing—and enjoyed the fact that she could make a living at it. For the most part, she has indicated she did not encounter major obstacles along the way, in spite of being a woman in a predominately male industry. She did not necessarily think of herself as a feminist (although she did illustrate the cover of the November 1973 issue of *Ms. magazine*.) Intentional or otherwise, though, Marie paved the way for other women to enter the field and have the respect once afforded almost exclusively to men. She demonstrated that anyone could have a successful career in comics, if one had the talent and perseverance.

She has served as an ambassador of sorts and a wonderful role model. She participated in a panel on “the role of women in comics” at the 1974 Comic Art Convention in New York, along with Flo Steinberg, Linda Fite, Jean Thomas, and Irene Vartanoff. She also participated in the Women of Comics Symposium at the 2006 Toronto Comic Con. In addition, her work was featured in the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art exhibition of women comic-book artists in 2006.

Marie was also a champion of how women are portrayed in comics. In a July 20, 1974 article in the *Long Island Press*, Marie told reporter Mark Finston, “In the ‘40s and ‘50s the usual heroine was simple ... she got weak at the knees at the handsomeness of the hero, no matter how capable she was in other matters. But men were never simpy at the sight of beautiful women. The only exceptions to that were the sons of villains. Today it’s more realistic. Women get sore at their husbands, and the girl friends of the super-heroes tell them off. Some comic book women now are even bullies!” When asked about the future, Marie exhibited remarkable foresight, “In 10 years women won’t be simpy at all. They’ll run for senator, be heads of firms. You might even begin to have ugly ladies with super powers. You now have ugly men with super powers ... some of them are gross!”

When you think of women in comics, Marie Severin may be the first one who comes to mind, but thanks to her example, she

is certainly not the only one. In this section, we hear from several friends and colleagues of Marie, all women, who have also enjoyed great success in the field of comics. Their experiences with Marie are alike in some ways and different in others, but they have one thing in common—a genuine affection for Marie Severin. Here, then, are interviews with Ramona Fradon, Trina Robbins, Flo Steinberg, and Linda Fite, and commentary by Irene Vartanoff, friends all to the first lady of comics.

ONE OF THE FRIENDS Marie met later in life was another well respected female artist, Ramona Fradon. Fradon began her career in 1950 and worked extensively for DC Comics. She is best known for illustrating *Aquaman* and co-creating the character Metamorpho. She later took over the Brenda Starr newspaper strip from Dale Messick. Fradon talks about Marie, the things they have in common,

and the times they have shared.

INTERVIEW WITH RAMONA FRADON

Dewey Cassell: *When and where did you first meet Marie?*

Ramona Fradon: Well, it’s funny. When I started drawing comics back in ‘62 or something, everybody would ask me, do I know Marie Severin? You know, because I was a woman, and she was the only other woman in the business. And, of course, I hadn’t met her and had no idea who she was. And I didn’t even know that she drew. I thought she was just in the bullpen or something over at Marvel. Over the years people kept asking me that, and I’d never met her. And then finally, when I’d been out of comics for years, I went to a convention, I think it was in Westchester somewhere, and met Marie for the first time. And, you know, I just thought she was wonderful.

Cassell: *You two do seem to get along very well. Did you hit it off from the first?*

Fradon: Yes, we did. We amused each other a lot. And, of course, we loved chatting about the guys and the super-heroes and all that.

Cassell: *Other than drawing, are there other things that you share in common with Marie?*

Fradon: Well, she was a Republican and I was a Democrat. [laughs] So we'd send each other horrible pictures of Bush or Clinton or whatever. I figure it was mostly our senses of humor that drew us together, because we really laughed a lot. One year we went out to San Diego together and roomed, she brought a friend of hers, and we had a great time. I remember riding around in rickshaws out there and just really having fun. I was always amazed when I sat next to her at the conventions at how easily she drew. She would draw the Hulk or whatever, the thing that everybody was asking her to draw, she could just whip it out in maybe three, four minutes. It was a perfect drawing. Her mind was so inventive. Marie is really a bright person. I mean, she's got a quick mind, and it's very creative.

Cassell: *I think that's a trait that you have, as well.*

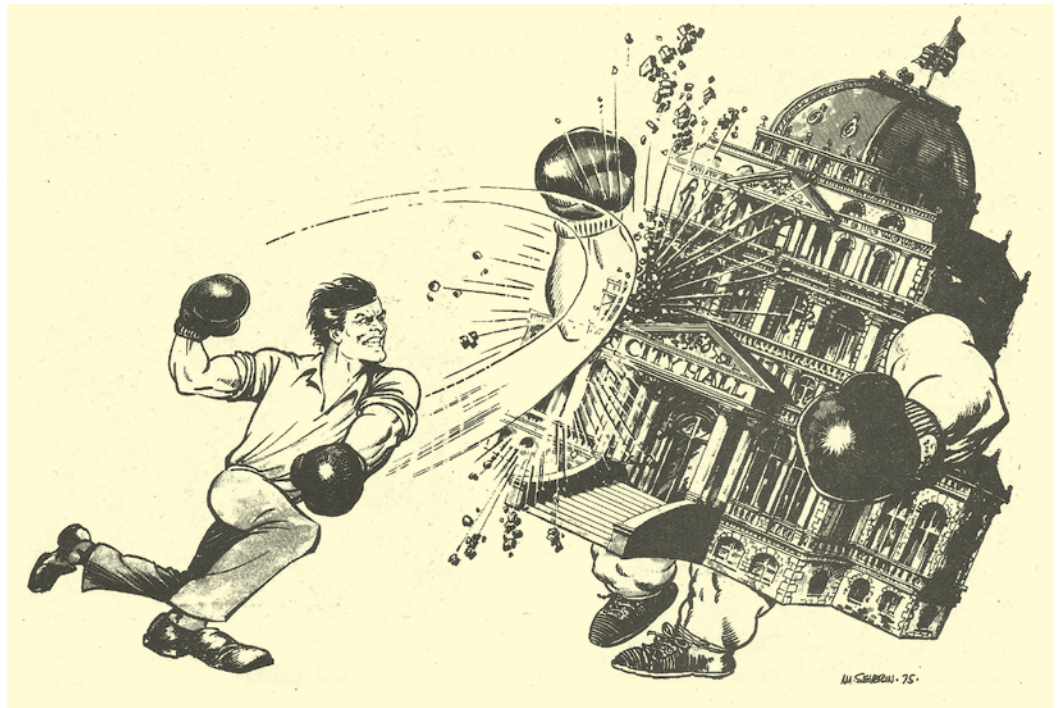
Fradon: I don't think so. I don't think that I have the quickness that Marie has, and I don't have the facility. I mean, she draws just effortlessly, and I struggle to draw. Without an eraser at a convention I couldn't get through, y'know? There's a difference. Also, Marie is so gregarious. She's just wonderfully friendly. For a person who's sort of a hermit, she's an extremely gregarious hermit, if there is such a thing.

Cassell: *It's true. So when you all were trading political jibes back and fourth, were these drawings of political characters?*

Fradon: I sent her a Ronald Reagan coloring book, and she sent me some horrible thing with Clinton and Hillary. I can't remember what it was. But we were always making trash about each other's politics. And then we had such fun with Trina that time we did a sleepover and Trina recorded it, and we drank wine, and it was just so funny, but it was so incoherent that we had to practically edit the whole thing from the beginning to make it the least bit readable. But I was kidding Marie because Trina is such a Women's Libber, and that's the last thing, I think, that Marie is. Although unconsciously she may be, you know. She certainly was a trailblazer and just struck out on her own, she had a career.

Cassell: *I think both of you were trailblazers in that regard.*

Fradon: Yeah, and I think we were both unconscious about it. I mean, I was never into the Women's movement until long after it had happened. I didn't see any point in it because I was already working, but most of the women I knew were housewives, and they were very frustrated, and they wanted to do more. But I just didn't relate to that at the time. Later on I cer-



1975 political illustration by Marie for one of Martin Goodman's men's magazines.

tainly did. And I think Marie was the same kind of a person. She was very conventional in a lot of ways, and yet she was in an occupation that was anything but conventional for a woman.

Cassell: *Did you face any hardships, yourself, in what was a male-dominated industry?*

Fradon: I don't think so. I mean, I have no idea what the men were making compared to what I was getting. I never knew anything like that. But, no, it seems to me that everybody was just looking for somebody who could do the drawing, and they didn't care if it was a woman or a man.

Cassell: *And there were some other women, like Lily Renee and a few other ones, who started out in the Golden Age, drawing.*

Fradon: Well, I can't emphasize enough how little I know about the business, and the people in it, and what was being done. So I have no idea if there were other women. I know later on there were some women that I admired a lot. I went to an exhibit that Trina set up at the Cartoon Museum downtown, *Women Cartoonists*, and I was really blown away by some of the work that they had done in the past, and were doing now. And it wasn't for the big comic houses, it was either books that they published, or things that they published at other publishers. But I really admire the things that they do. Very creative. But also not super-hero stuff. It's a whole different feel.

Cassell: *I think one of the nice things about publishing now is there are a lot more avenues today to get things published.*

Fradon: I guess so. People can self-publish, and with the computer they can do all kinds of things. And the graphic novels. I think you're right. So women I think are doing wonderful work, they're just not getting the blockbuster movies and the super-hero acclaim that the men are getting.



LEFT Photo of Ramona Fradon. **RIGHT** Sketches of alternative designs for a new Cat costume by Ramona Fradon. Photo by Luigi Novi



Cassell: Marie had mentioned that when she was working at Marvel, for example, especially in the early days, the only two women in the office were her and the secretary. She said that she never felt any ostracism or anything, but, by the same token, the guys didn't necessarily socialize with her, either.

Fradon: Yeah. That makes sense.

Cassell: Did you find that to be the case, as well?

Fradon: Well, I wasn't around. I mean, I would come in once a month and go over a job, and then usually I'd go out to lunch with George Kashdan or sometimes Bob Haney, but that's all. I didn't know anyone. And, of course, I used to go out with Joe Orlando and drink martinis together after work. I mean, that was fun, but I wouldn't know if I would have hung out with the guys or not. It's hard to say.

Cassell: Did you read comics at all?

Fradon: No. I never had read them, until I went out and read them before I tried to get a job. I went out and for about two weeks I read comic books. I'd read the newspaper strips when I was a kid. I loved them. When I decided I'd try doing this, I somehow knew what was required, and I could draw, and that stuff that I adored from years ago.

Cassell: Do you come from an artistic family like Marie's?

Fradon: My father was a commercial lettering man, and my mother had wanted to be an artist, but when she got married she gave it up. So she had us going to art classes in Chicago at the Art Institute at the age of four or something. I still remember drawing from statues in the musty basement of the institute there. So we were exposed from the beginning to art, and to the trappings of art, like the drawing board, and the ink, and

the brushes, and all that stuff. It was very familiar. And then I always drew. I used to doodle cartoon-like drawings. I drew horses a lot. So when I was in school I became known as one of the kids who are "the artist" in school. When I look back on the things that I drew, it's embarrassing. And then my father wanted me to be an artist, so I was sort of steered in that direction and didn't bother to study when I was in school. But when it came time to choose between colleges and art school, it was pretty decided ahead of time. I don't think I could have gotten into a college.

Cassell: You ended up doing comic strips, though, which you had enjoyed reading.

Fradon: Yeah, that's right. I did *Brenda Starr* and it was culture and fashions, at least when Dale was doing it. She had Brenda in an elegant dress or an outfit every day. We needed to keep up on the fashions, and she was very proud that she had anticipated a lot of the fashion trends with Brenda. But I just wasn't interested in that. It was so ironic that I ended up drawing that strip, and yet there I was.

Cassell: We've talked about this before, but you actually penciled a couple of issues for Marvel.

Fradon: Yes, I did. I did *The Cat* right at the last issue, but they killed it, so that issue never came out. And then I did a *Fantastic Four*, and that's all I did. Then I went back to DC.

Cassell: Did you enjoy doing the *Fantastic Four* story?

COLOR GALLERY



Color 1994 Doctor Strange commission by Marie. Courtesy of Jerry Boyd.

JOHN P. SEVERIN

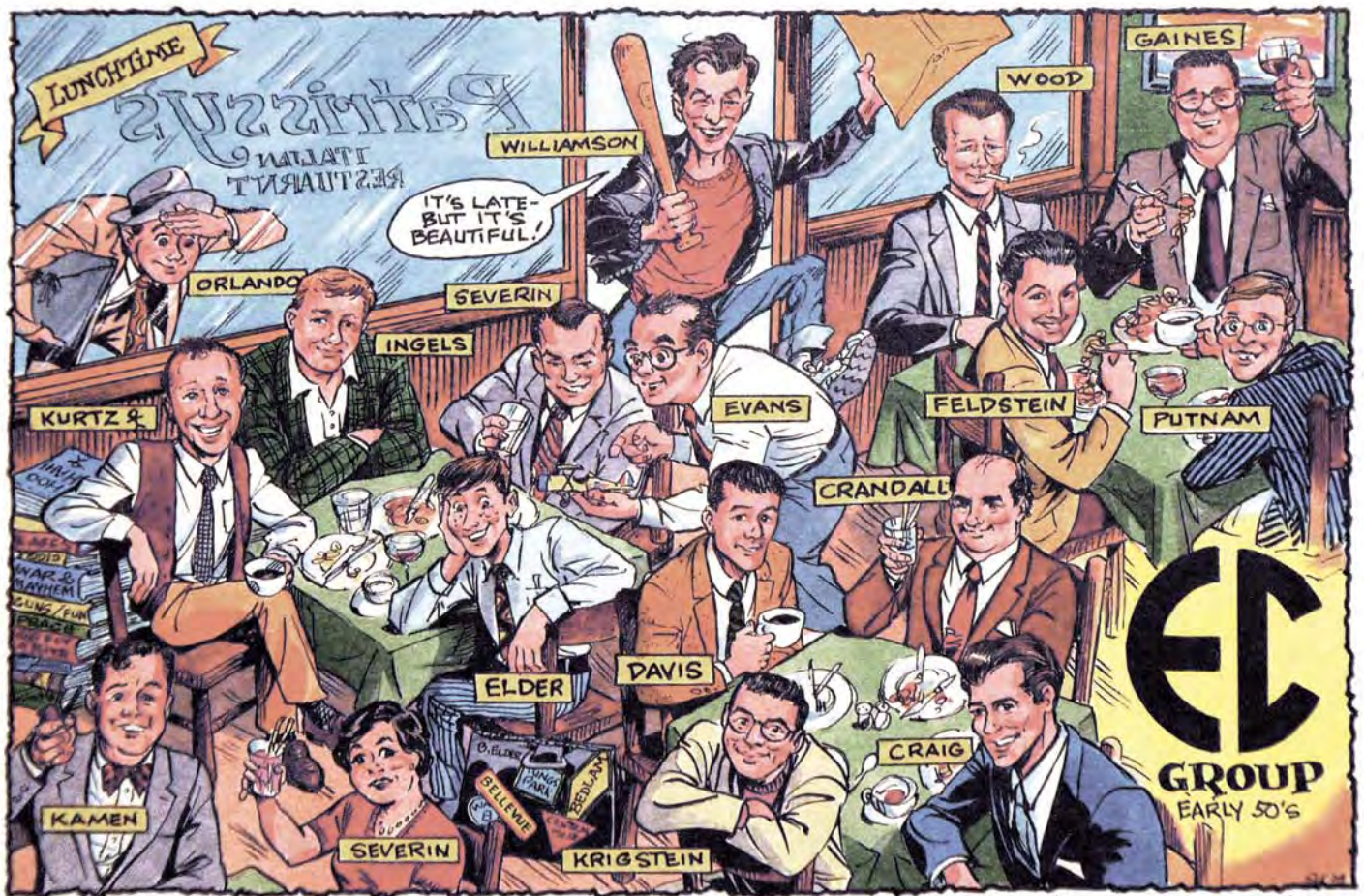
TWO-FISTED TALENT



THIS IS AN UNABASHED SWIPE BY Marie Severin - AUG. 1998.



FACING PAGE Marie illustrated this piece in honor of her brother's tribute dinner at the 1998 San Diego Comic Con. **ABOVE** Caricatures from correspondence between Marie and her friends Eleanor Hezel and Jean Davenport. *Courtesy of Eleanor Hezel and Jean Davenport.*



Bill - Hey! Mr. Fan Boy - I Hope You Enjoy - Just to you - Marie

TOP

2004 illustration of the EC gang at lunch in the early 1950s.

BOTTOM

1950s painting of Marie by Johnny Craig. Courtesy of Bill Leach





HUMOR

A good sense of humor will serve you well in a variety of circumstances. It can diffuse a tense situation, break the ice with a new group of people, and brighten a dreary day. It is a talent that only a few truly possess (although that doesn't stop the rest of us from trying.) Marie Severin, though, is not only an exceptional artist, but a gifted humorist as well. And that talent is one she readily shared with friends and fans, as is evident in much of her art.

During the time period in which Marvel Comics was gaining steam, it was common to find product advertisements on television and in magazines where they referred to the competition as "Brand X," rather than the actual product name, presumably to avoid any litigation from competitors. And, of course, "Brand X" always proved to be inferior. Marvel decided to apply the same logic to comic books, with a touch of humor thrown in.

NOT BRAND ECHH

When you ask anyone about Marie Severin—peers, friends or fans—they may tell you they loved her work on the Hulk or they admired her contributions to EC or that her version of Kull is their favorite. But they will almost invariably add, "And she has a great sense of humor." It is that remarkable gift of humor that leaves the greatest impression on the people whose lives she touches, regardless of their age or gender. Humor comes most naturally to Marie, so it is only natural that when she is drawing for fun, humor is the form it is most likely to take. And she has had a lot of fun over the years.

In the early days of Marvel Comics, editor Stan Lee gave each of the creators—writers, artists, letterers, etc.—a nickname (or in some cases, more than one), including himself. It was Stan "The Man" Lee (or occasionally "Smilin'" Stan Lee.) Sometimes they reflected a predominant characteristic of the person (or the exact opposite), but the chief requirement was that they should be alliterative or rhyme. The effect was to encourage reader recognition of, and identification with, the Marvel creators. Bullpen nicknames included "Rascally" Roy Thomas, "Jazzy" John Romita (or John "Ring-A-Ding" Romita), "Joltin'" Joe Sinnott, Jack "King" Kirby, "Happy" Herb Trimpe, and last but not least, "Mirthful" Marie Severin. Given that the Marvel offices were covered with caricatures by Marie, the latter is easily understood.

In this section, we examine a variety of ways in which Marie's humor has manifested itself in her work, beginning with the humor comic books that she helped create and continuing through her work on special projects, including advertising, promotions, fan clubs, and comics targeted at young children. Finally, we'll take a look at those infamous caricatures that Marie has drawn over the years. So enjoy the sharp wit (and sharp pencil) of the humor of Marie Severin.

IN ISSUE #95 OF *Alter Ego* magazine, editor Roy Thomas notes that in 1965, Stan began to refer to the competitors of Marvel as "Brand Echh." It was used in the context of warning fans not to be lured away by the imitations being offered by the unnamed competitors. Stan was clearly using the "Brand X" approach common in advertising (and perhaps a borrowed word from *MAD* magazine, which spelled it "Ecch.") Fan reaction to the use of the term "Brand Echh" was mixed, although Stan was quick to point out that it did not refer to any one competitor, but was rather a generic term for all of them.

Then one day in 1967, Stan out went to lunch with Roy Thomas and Gary Friedrich. Roy and Gary pitched the idea to Stan of creating a humor comic book along the lines of the original *MAD*, with parodies of the competition. Stan liked the idea, but suggested poking fun at their own Marvel characters instead. That self-deprecating humor would prove to be the secret of their success (although the competition's characters did not escape their rapier wit). As for the title, it was originally going to be called *Brand Echh*, as evident in the August 1967 Bullpen Bulletin page in which Stan announced the new humor comic, as well as the indicia in the first four issues. However, readers referred to it as *Not Brand Echh* from the beginning and it stuck.

Not Brand Echh got off to a great start. Who would have thought that artists like Jack Kirby, reknowned for his larger than life action heroes, would do such a great job drawing humor comics? It was almost as if, while drawing the Fantastic Four battling the Silver Surfer, Jack had seen the humor in it and been champing at the bit to let it out. (It was Kirby who first drew the book's mascot, Forbush-Man.) Part of what made the *Not Brand Echh* stories so amusing was that they often



Cover of *Not Brand Echh* #8 by Marie.
Courtesy of Zaddick Longenbach.

directly paralleled the “serious” stories published in Marvel super-hero comics, and occasionally employed the same artists to draw them.

Marie was a key contributor to *Not Brand Echh* from the beginning. She was a great caricaturist and loved to fill the stories with little signs and hidden messages, like Bill Elder was famous for doing in the original *MAD* comics. She often worked with writer Roy Thomas on the story plots. In fact, Marie actually wrote some of the stories she illustrated in later issues, such as the “Super-Hero Daydreams.” Her brother John also illustrated a parody of a Sgt. Fury story in the first issue.

In addition, Marie penciled most of the covers for *Not Brand Echh*, starting with issue #2. There is an interesting story about the cover for that issue. Marie apparently intended that Spidey-Man would have a smile, with white teeth showing, but the colorist just colored it like the rest of his mask. (Note the pattern of the webbing over his mouth, compared with the rest of the mask.) Justification for why Marie preferred to do her own coloring.

Marie clearly enjoyed her tenure on *Not Brand Echh*. In an April 14, 1996 article in the *Asbury Park Press Sunday*, Marie told staff writer Mark Voger, “I love whimsy. Stan would just let me go, pretty much. I don’t think he could control me. A lot of the stuff was mine. I had a ball.”

Some of the best stories Marie had in *Not Brand Echh* featured “The Aging Spidey-Man,” “The Inedible Bulk,” and “Prince No-More, the Sunk Mariner,” which is probably not surprising since Marie had drawn the latter two characters in their own super-hero comics. Other favorites by Marie from *Not Brand Echh* include the “Super-Hero Greeting Cards,” “How to be a Comic Book Artist,” and “Drawing Lessons.”

Without explanation, *Not Brand Echh* was canceled after thirteen issues, though such decisions were typically made based on sales (or lack thereof.) As of this writing, the series has not yet been collected into a *Marvel Masterworks* or *Essentials* volume, although individual stories have been reprinted. The *Daredevil* and *Inhumans Masterworks* volumes both included *Not Brand Echh* parodies. (See also the upcoming section on the *CRAZY!* comic book.)

There was also a foreign edition of *Not Brand Echh*, repackaged and printed magazine-sized in the UK under the title *Marvel Madhouse*. The debut issue featured the cover and stories (though not in the same order) from *Not Brand Echh* #3, perhaps because it was an “origins” issue, along with “The Fastest Gums In The West” story by Marie from *Not Brand Echh* #1. It also included a new three-page humor story by Tim Quinn and Dick Howett. Subsequent issues combined stories and covers from various issues of *Not Brand Echh*. Later issues of *Marvel Madhouse* included reprints from *Howard the Duck* comics and *CRAZY* magazine as well.

Not Brand Echh was a high-water mark in humor for Marvel Comics, but it was certainly not the last time that they would tickle our funny bone. With a Marie Severin on staff, you’ve just got to find a vehicle for that sense of humor.



ROY THOMAS HAS HAD a prolific and distinguished career in comics. He was a writer and editor at Marvel, ultimately taking over for Stan Lee. He is particularly remembered for his exceptional work on *Conan*, as well as *Not Brand Echh*. Today, he is editor of the award-winning magazine *Alter Ego*. What follows is an interview with Thomas about the art and humor of Marie Severin.

INTERVIEW WITH ROY THOMAS

Dewey Cassell: *When you first started at Marvel, was Marie already there?*

Roy Thomas: Oh, yes. She was one of the few people who was.

Cassell: *Was she doing production-type work at the time?*

Thomas: Yes, production. She wasn’t doing any [art]work. She did some coloring, I think, but of course Stan Goldberg was the main colorist, but I think she was already doing some.

Cassell: *So, moving ahead to later in the 1960s. I know you talked in the article that you did in *Alter Ego* #95 about how you guys came up with the idea for *Not Brand Echh*, but what prompted you to get Marie involved with that?*

Thomas: I'm trying to remember, was she already doing the *Hulk* by then?

Cassell: Yes, Hulk, Doctor Strange...

Thomas: Doctor Strange, the Hulk, she'd already been doing some things. But, of course, we'd always seen her humor work. She did a lot of office cartoons. And there was always a cartoony aspect of her work. That made her one of the logical choices to do it, along with the fact we were having a lot of artists who did the regular series do their stuff, like Kirby and Colan and others, and Marie was drawing some, so why not her, too? But we thought of her as somebody who really was, and could be, more of a humor artist than most of the other guys were, naturally.

Cassell: *I wondered if you deliberately put her on the parodies of the Hulk because that's what she'd been drawing?*

Thomas: Well, I don't remember any particular conscious thought process. Once we thought of the book, I think she was just an inevitability from the beginning. Maybe Jack was going to do the Fantastic Four, and somebody else was going to do a strip they were particularly identified with, but Marie was somebody who was going to be tossed on almost anything, so I don't remember any real discussion that led her to do the rest. I don't recall how it came about. It just seemed like a natural. There was never any question about it. She was the only artist, really, who was thought of in terms of that was her natural thing, until Tom Sutton walked in a week later.

Cassell: *When you wrote the stories for Not Brand Echh, did you use a different approach, or did you still use the "Marvel Method?"*

Thomas: It was the Marvel Method. In fact, probably even less so, because, I don't know, with Marie, I'm not sure how

much I wrote down. I guess I must have written down some things somewhere, but I wouldn't swear to it. Marie's just one of these people you just sort of talk over the idea with her, and then she drew it, she added a lot of gags as she went. Whether she was working with me, or Stan, or whoever.

Cassell: *That was one of the things I was going to ask you. A lot of her Not Brand Echh work had these little signs and sayings in the background. Was that her doing?*

Thomas: Well, not all. It was a natural thing. The thing is that I think all of us had some of that, because, I mean, Stan had written parody humor back in the Fifties at the time when *MAD* was fresh and new, and Gary and I were big fans of the *MAD* color comic. And Marie, of course, had worked on that material. She'd colored it. So it was just a natural thing to do. I think that people like Marie and I, and maybe Gary, but certainly Marie and I were more in tune to do that kind of thing than Stan or the other artists were. We thought in those terms I think a lot more strongly than most of the other artists.

Cassell: *The two of you seemed to work well together when you teamed up on something.*

Thomas: We did. Some of my favorite things of the entire run, although the Silver Surfer thing at the end was pretty good, but it was probably the Superman takeoff. But there were several others, the takeoff on the Sub-Mariner, Hulk, Kull, which we'd also done the serious version of, which I thought was a kick in the head. And then actually, she did two of my favorite parodies of all time for *SPOOF* just a little later, the Dark Shadows parody and the parody of Tarzan. Which, without saying so, we made it sort of like a sequel to the two *MAD* parodies that her brother had drawn. It sort of, in a sense, picked up where they left off. I mean, it was intended as the third one of those, and, of course, John Severin ended up inking it.



LEFT Photo of Roy Thomas from the 1992 Famous Comic Book Creators card set. **RIGHT** "The Mighty Sore battles the Inedible Bulk" 1996 commission by Marie. Courtesy of Jim McPherson.



Have you ever wondered where those advertisements featuring Marvel characters come from? Or the promotional comics for Kool-Aid or the Dallas Cowboys? Or how about the Spider-Man and Hulk toilet paper? (No joke.) Thanks to her versatile artistic ability and being in the office and on staff, Marie Severin was frequently chosen to illustrate a variety of special projects for Marvel Comics.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

THE EXAMPLES OF MARIE'S artwork at Marvel go well beyond the comics themselves. Continuing a practice established with the *Esquire* magazine articles (see previous section on Heroes), Marie was frequently assigned the task of putting together house ads, promotional material, and other special projects for Marvel. Marie played this role both while still drawing the monthly comics and later as part of the Marvel department that handled special projects. What follows are a sampling of the many special projects Marie was involved in at Marvel.



HOUSE ADS

The term "house ad" refers to an advertisement for the company that is publishing the comic book or magazine. Literally, an advertisement for the "house," in this case Marvel. One type of house ad consisted of advertisements for upcoming issues of comics and magazines. Another type of house ad involved advertising for fan clubs like the Merry Marvel Marching Society or FOOM (both of which are covered in a later chapter.) An additional type of house ad solicited subscribers for the comics and magazines.

House ads often used reproductions of existing art, which were typically assembled by someone working in the production department using photostats of the original art from the comics or merchandise. The other type of house ad used new artwork, created specifically for the advertisement, designed to grab the readers attention and entice them to purchase the product.

Sometimes the line between house ads and commercial advertisements was a little gray. Marvel was involved in ventures like the *Superhero Catalog*, which in turn advertised in Marvel Comics. The same was true of Mego and other companies that licensed the Marvel characters. Marie and other Marvel staffers often did the artwork for those advertisements as well.

As Marvel Comics grew, they began using more original material in their house ads. As the trend shifted, the call increasingly came to Marie to provide the art, which often had a humorous slant. Some examples of the house ads she created for Marvel include:

- In an advertisement for the record album "Reflections of a Rock Super-Hero," a collection of rock and roll songs about Spider-Man, Marie drew the image of Stan Lee.
- In the advertisement for Spider-Man, Hulk and Captain America Halloween costumes, Marie drew the kids in the foreground that are wearing the costumes.
- A New Years subscription ad featuring the Hulk wearing a diaper and 1984 sash.
- A house ad for *CRAZY* magazine featuring the Inedible Bulk smashing through a wall.

Someone also had to write the copy for the house ads, whether they used new art or not. Former Marvel staffer Scott Edelman wrote many of the house ads that appeared in the mid-1970s, several of which were illustrated by Marie Severin.

PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL

With the increasing recognition and popularity of Marvel Comics characters, it is not a surprise that they would capital-

House advertisement for the record album "Reflections of a Rock Super-Hero" from the mid-1970s. The image of Stan Lee by Marie was later reused in the second series of Marvel Value Stamps.



ize on opportunities to use them in promotional material for themselves and for other companies. Promotions using Marvel characters could translate into greater sales. In some cases, the characters were licensed to other companies to use in their promotions. In other cases, Marvel actually produced the promotional material for the other company. In both cases, Marvel typically used staff artists like John Romita and Marie Severin to support such endeavors.

Promotional material took a variety of forms and Marie produced artwork for many of them. Some examples of the promotional material that Marie did for Marvel include:

- *Spider-Man and The Dallas Cowboys* in "Danger in Dallas." This promotional comic book was produced in 1983 as an advertising supplement for the *Dallas Times Herald*, featuring plot and layouts by Marie Severin. She also did the cover and coloring for another 1983 *Dallas Times Herald* supplement, *Spider-Man* in "Christmas in Dallas," which was published under the banner "The Marvel Newspaper Network."
- Hostess advertisement. During the mid-1970s, Hostess contracted with Marvel and other comic book companies to produce a series of advertisements featuring comic book characters in often humorous situations involving Hostess products. Marvel artists Gene Colan, George Tuska, and others drew ads for Hostess. It seems likely that Marie did as well, but there were no credits provided on the artwork, so it is uncertain which one(s) she might have done. It is thought she may have played a role in the Hostess cup cakes ad featuring the Thing in

TOP LEFT 1984 New Years Marvel Comics subscription advertisement featuring a diaper clad Hulk by Marie.
BOTTOM RIGHT Toilet paper featuring a complete story with Spider-Man and the Hulk produced by Oh Dawn! Inc. in 1979, attributed in part to Marie.

"A Lesson to be Learned," which appeared in November 1981 Marvel titles.

- Stickers. In 1966, a series of small strips of stickers were produced that could be purchased in bubble gum machines. Some of the sticker strips were scenes from a miniature story starring characters like Iron Man. Other stickers were puzzle pieces that could be combined to form a single image of Thor or the Hulk. The images for several of these stickers were drawn by Marie Severin.
- Marvel Mini Books. Produced in 1966, these were billed as the "world's smallest comic books." And, in fact, each one did contain a complete, if a bit campy, illustrated story. There were six different books starring Spider-Man, Thor, the Hulk, Sgt. Fury, Captain America, and Millie the Model. (Each one was printed with covers in multiple colors.) Marie Severin contributed art to at least the Spider-Man mini book, if not others as well.
- *The Adventures of Kool-Aid Man*. A 1983 promotional comic book featuring the mascot of the flavored drink mix. Story colored by Marie Severin.
- Marvel Value Stamp featuring Stan Lee. Starting in 1974, Marvel began including "stamps" on the letters pages of Marvel comics featuring different Marvel characters, which could be cut out and taped into a stamp book. The second series of stamps were puzzle pieces that could be taped into a stamp book to form a complete image. Stamp #100 from the second series featured the image of Stan Lee from the house ad for the Spider-Man record album. (See House Ads above.)



HOME AGAIN

“Retirement” for Marie Severin did not translate into sitting on the couch. Marie continued to remain active in the field of comics in a variety of ways, including contributing to sketch card sets, attending comic book conventions, and doing commissions for fans.

ters and some full figure cards (which was quite a feat on a trading card!) She also drew a few *Not Brand Echh* cards and even ones of Stan Lee. Collectors will also find “uncut” sketchagraph cards that Marie did later, often at conventions.

SKETCH CARDS

Like many other artists, Marie was asked to contribute to various trading card sets, most notably the *Marvel Silver Age* and *Marvel Legends*.

MARVEL SILVER AGE

In 1998, Fleer/Skybox produced the *Marvel Silver Age* card set, which included randomly inserted “sketchagraph” cards and autograph cards by some of the best Marvel artists from the Silver Age of comics (as well as a few newer artists). Contributors included John Romita, Gene Colan, George Tuska, Dick Ayers, and Marie Severin. Instead of a photograph, Marie’s autograph card featured a caricature of her above her signature. For the sketchagraphs, Marie penciled many different characters, including Doctor Strange, the Hulk, the Avengers, Thor, the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and the X-Men, among others. Marie attempted to make each card unique and, unlike most other artists, she drew a tremendous variety of charac-

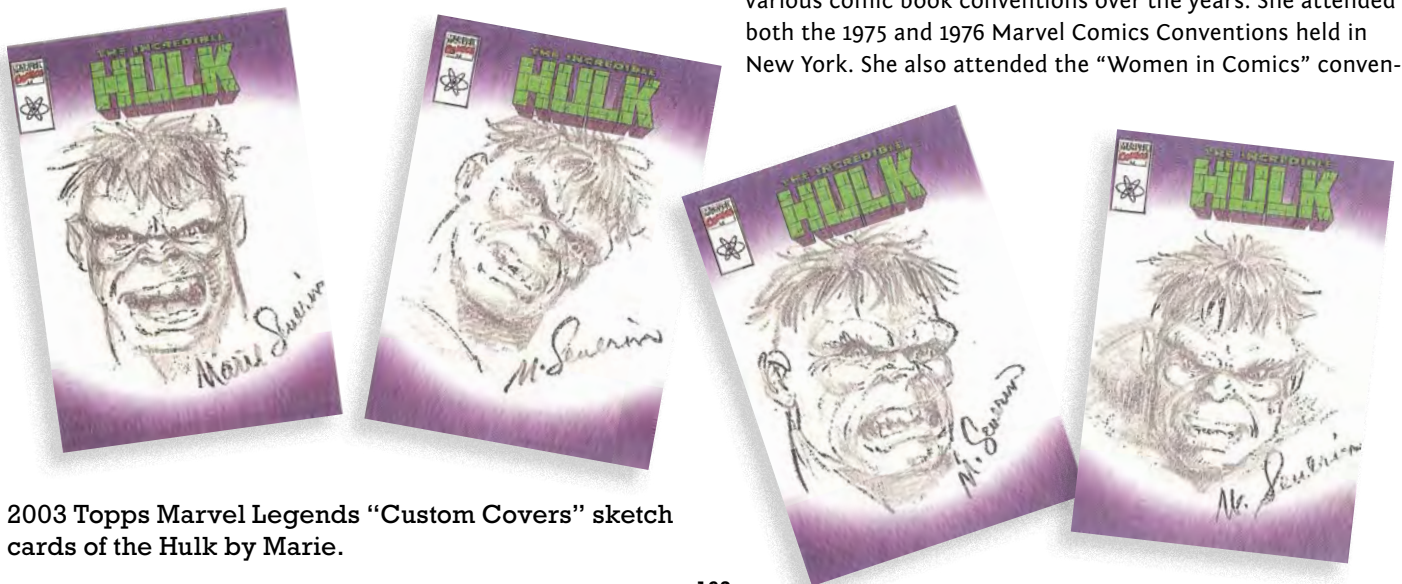
MARVEL LEGENDS

In 2001, Topps won the license to produce Marvel trading cards and released the *Marvel Legends* set, with randomly inserted sketch cards called “Custom Covers.” In 2003, they produced a set focused entirely on the Incredible Hulk, using the same type of sketch cards. Marie Severin was one of the artists who drew sketch cards for the Hulk set. Most of the cards Marie did for this set were head sketches and all were of the Hulk, making it difficult to have each one be entirely unique. There were less of them, though—only one in every twenty boxes—making them more rare.

The artists did not get paid much to do the sketch and autograph cards. (George Tuska recalled it was only about \$1 per autograph and \$2 per sketch card for the *Marvel Silver Age* set.) However, because they were small, they could be done fairly quickly, and it provided a brief diversion for Marie during her “retirement.”

CONVENTIONS AND COMMISSIONS

Along with many of her peers, Marie attended and supported various comic book conventions over the years. She attended both the 1975 and 1976 Marvel Comics Conventions held in New York. She also attended the “Women in Comics” conven-



2003 Topps Marvel Legends “Custom Covers” sketch cards of the Hulk by Marie.

tion in 1978, organized by the Delaware Valley Comicart Consortium (DVCC), an organization of fans formed to conduct "activities to promote an appreciation of the comic book form," as co-founder Rich Greene described it. Marie Severin was a guest of honor at the convention and drew the cover program, depicting dozens of female characters in comics. This gorgeous piece of Kull artwork (previously used in *FOOM*) featured the 1977 Comic Art Benefit Auction at the Chicago Comic

Marie has also been the recipient of numerous awards. The Society of Comic Book Arts bestowed the Shazam Award for Best Professional Artist (Division) on Marie in 1974. She received the Inkpot Award at Comic-Con in 1988. In July 2000, Marie went back to the San Diego Comic-Con for a 50th anniversary EC Reunion that included Al Feldstein, Angelo Torres, Jack Kamen, and Al Williamson, among others. She returned again to the Comic Con the following year to receive the Will Eisner Award.

Marie also attended smaller conventions. Jeff Harnett, who attended with Marie, recalls one such local show, "A comic shop in my area."



Christina Severin, Marie's daughter, recalls the benefit auction. Some of the children's creators were asked to draw more rare and wonderful characters. Marie said 'Yes' and flew to the advertising and auction list) it was a lot of fun. Marie will be truly touched by the number of people who told her they had come just to see her. The night of the event Marie spent countless hours doing free sketches of all the Marvel super-heroes for

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up this beautiful painting which was way beyond what I had originally inquired about. Upon asking for her fee, Marie said 'I do not charge my friends', and would not accept my offers. Instead I was able to convince her to have lunch with me at a local pub. Marie immediately asked the waitress 'What cold beer do you have on tap?' While having our meal, Marie talked about Stan Lee's charisma, Colan and Sinnott's talents, Kirby's epic stature and Buscema's incredible skills. Marie also talked about getting comfortable with the Marvel



Fleer/Skybox Marvel Silver Age sketchagraph cards by Marie.
TOP Spidey takes a break. **BOTTOM LEFT** Self-portrait of Marie. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Full figure sketchagraph card of the Hulk. *Courtesy of Jeff Sharpe.*