



With Great Power Come Great Responsibility...to Create Change

An Interview with Marvel's Axel Alonso on the New, Multi-Racial Wall-Crawler

One thing about childhood that always sticks out prominently in our heads is our favorite superhero. Whether it was the indomitableness of Superman, or the intellect and tech-savvy of Iron Man, the qualities of these characters gave our still-budding minds something to aspire to. However, for minorities, there was one problem: none of these heroes looked or lived like we did.

For decades, the dearth of racial diversity among major comic-book characters seemed to go unanswered, and there had not been much significant effort to change the status quo—until now. Last fall, in an unprecedented move, Marvel Comics unveiled the identity of its new Ultimate Spider-Man to be that of Miles Morales, a 13-year-old boy with an African-American father and a Hispanic mother. Similar to Peter Parker, Morales receives arachnid-like powers after being bitten by a radioactive spider. When Parker is killed in action, Morales takes over as the new web-slinger.

While Marvel's Ultimate Universe isn't considered to be its primary line of continuity, the titles have grown wildly popular since its debut in the early 2000's. This change was, by no means, a small task. We caught up with Axel Alonso, Marvel's editor-in-chief, to discuss what the character of Miles Morales means to comics and to young readers like his son, who now have a hero they can be proud of.

Why was it important for you to introduce a biracial character as the alter ego of Marvel's most, popular super hero? Marvel is at its best when it's at the forefront of pop culture. But for me, there's an additional component because I'm of mixed race, like Miles. I have an English mother and a Mexican and Spanish father. I like the fact that I've received letters from people who say how much it means to them. They've gone to buy their first comic book for their child because it's a gesture of inclusion for them. So yeah, for me it's both revolutionary and long over-due that we're doing this.

How does Miles' ethnicity come up in the comic book? Is it acknowledged outright or is it just expected that the readers will react to the color of his skin and that of his parents?

His ethnicity is reflected in his style, his attitude, and the little details, like the fact that he's a gifted student who goes to a charter school. It's a very canny touch that the writer, Brian Michael Bendis, brought to the book. It deals with an issue that everybody knows about: the quality of the public school system. The charter school lottery has such an implication on a child's life. You're a number on a ball, and if it doesn't come up, there goes your future. Not all of us have trust funds. Not all of us have a solid middle-class background. Growing up, my dad told me, "You can't just be as good as everybody else. You have to be better." Miles Morales knows that if he doesn't do well, there isn't a future for him.

The New Spider-Man

Written by J.J. McCorvey



How did the idea come up, to make the Ultimate Comics Spider-Man diverse and to be a different kind of character? We were in a writers' workshop, working on a story that became "The Death of Spider-Man." So we wrestled with the idea of that and the obvious question was, if you're going to kill Peter Parker – this really popular character in the Ultimate Universe that people have fallen in love with over the past eleven years – who are you going to replace him with? That's when we revisited the notion of going with an African-American Spider-Man. Then someone brought up the idea of taking it a step further and making him multi-ethnic. I'm of mixed race, and the President of the United States is of mixed race, so when the suggestion was brought up, I was very supportive of it. It was more "now" ... it's the world we live in.

I read comics as a kid and I still do today. I've always felt like there's a lack of leading characters that are minorities. There's been a lot of improvement, but still a lot of room for more. Do you feel that? We take a good hard look at ourselves in the mirror every year to try to make that be the case. That's why you see characters like Araña. That's why Brian [Michael Bendis] made Luke Cage an Avenger, to legitimize him. That's why we married the Black Panther and Storm. It was the biggest wedding of the decade in comics.

So we're well aware there is room for improvement, and that was obviously one of the things going on in our minds when we made the decision to make Miles Morales Spider-Man. People say to us, why didn't you just make a new superhero and call him whatever you want? But part of the beauty of putting Miles in that costume is you're hard-pressed to find a more recognizable superhero than Spider-Man.

What's going on with Miles now in the book? Any upcoming plans for the character?

Miles is learning who he is and what it means to be a hero, but he's also learning what his powers are. He has the ability to "stun" his opponents by touching them, and he also has this chameleon quality that allows him to blend in with his environment. But not all of his powers have been revealed. We want people to feel like they're on that rollercoaster ride with him.

What do you hope the legacy of Miles Morales will contribute to comics? One of the things about Spider-Man is that when you look at him, you can be him, no matter what race and gender you are. My nine-year-old son loved him before he had any idea who Peter Parker was. I love the fact that now, a generation of kids will get the thrill of learning to love Spider-Man. When you peel back the mask on his face, he'll be more like them and his last name will sound more like theirs. I think that's a beautiful thing.

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