

On Steve Ditko
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For a generation, Steve Ditko has been known among cartoon insiders as one of the supreme visual stylists in the history of the form. The success of the recent Spider-Man movies has brought new prominence to his work among the general public. Back in the 1960s, Ditko drew Spider-Man from a concept created by Marvel Comics editor, Stan Lee. As time went along, Ditko made both character and plot contributions to the Spider-Man series. In his half-century career, Ditko has worked on innumerable other characters and series, including the Hulk, Iron Man, and Dr. Strange.

Despite the enormous impact on the popular culture of Ditko and other cartoon artists—Jack Kirby (the Fantastic Four, the X-Men) and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (Superman) come to mind—comic book illustration historically has not been a lucrative profession. Until more recent times with artists such as Frank Miller (Sin City, Daredevil), artists were paid a one-time, flat-page-rate fee for their work and received no future returns on their creations. They worked assignment to assignment and had no financial stability or health insurance benefits or pensions. These years, Ditko gets by on social security and a veteran's pension. He lives in Spartan fashion, just managing to pay for his lodging and a tiny Times Square studio in New York City and buy ink and paper for his drawings, which he continues diligently, and apparently contentedly, to produce.

With the recent attention he has received, Ditko could alter his financial stress immediately by selling his original artwork (which, with the help of fellow artists, was finally returned to him) and accepting private commissions to re-create his old work; but he has done none of that. He could be working for major established publishing outlets that have the resources to promote and distribute his creations effectively; instead he self-publishes and reaches a meager audience.

Why does Ditko proceed in this fashion? In a world in which maxing out on your commercial opportunities is the norm, what accounts for this pattern? What makes Steve Ditko tick?

It seems to me that to understand Steve Ditko you have to understand his fundamental principles, what he most believes in, his personal philosophy of life; they direct his choices, his actions in the world. Concepts of what is true and right in human conduct, in his conduct, matter incredibly to Steve Ditko. His personal integrity—living in alignment with his highest beliefs and values—matters incredibly to Steve Ditko. To Steve Ditko, the world isn't comprised of shades of grey. To him, there is a right way to do things and a wrong way; it's one or the other, right or wrong, period. To Steve Ditko, things aren't relative: what is right and true is right and true here, there, in the past, and now, and for you and me and everybody else, no qualifications, no exceptions. And as long as he has life, Steve Ditko is determined to do things the right way regardless of any negative consequences that may result. Simply, Steve Ditko refuses to do anything that compromises his principles, or another way to put it, his honor.

Where did this posture come from? I'm sure it came from his parents—either he is emulating them or reacting against them—and from people he has known and things he has done in his life, including his experience in the military during WWII. But from all accounts the biggest influence on Steve Ditko came from the thinking of a woman who as far I know he never met, the novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982).

In her novels (e.g., *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*) and non-fiction writing (e.g., *The Virtue of Selfishness*), Rand set out a philosophy she called Objectivism (she capitalized the term). Rand asserted that the most essential and admirable aspects of man (to her, man included women) were his (her) capacity for rational thought and potential to be heroic. Rand held up the ideal of a certain type of individual: one whose thinking is rigorously grounded in reason and reality, and whose conduct accords with what was rational, real, and right (to her, there are no contradictions among those three). Rand's exemplary man thinks for himself: he doesn't uncritically accept the current fashion in thought or action; he isn't, in the parlance of our time, a "conventional wisdom zombie." Rand applauds personal autonomy and unfettered, true self-expression in every aspect of one's life,

particularly in one's work. One's work should reflect a man's highest insights and ideals at that point in his journey through life. Rand's ideal man is most certainly not a herd animal: he doesn't lose himself in the crowd, doesn't pitch his life to the approval or rewards of his audience or those in power. Rand's most laudable man (and again, woman) embraces life, affirms his life, gets on with his life the best he can, as completely as he is able, until the end. Rand portrays in her fiction and argues in her non-fiction that living in accordance with Objectivist principles may result in both worldly success and great hardship, but either way, it is the path to self-respect and inner satisfaction. A readable biography of Rand that provides a good introduction to Rand's thinking and an up-close look at Rand herself is *The Passion of Ayn Rand* by Barbara Branden.

From the late 1960s on, and increasingly from the 1980s to the present time, Steve Ditko took Rand's ideas to heart and lived his life in accordance with them. Much of Ditko's post-Spider-Man life and work reflects Randian beliefs: one example, a character he created, Mr. A., embodies these principles. Ditko's Objectivist philosophy, it seems to me, goes a long way in explaining actions he has taken that have left some scratching their heads and others dismissing him as rigid and dogmatic and incorrigible. Some illustrations:

Why no recreations of his old work? That would be going backward, says Ditko. One's work should reflect the outer edge of one's current beliefs, insights, and commitments. Similarly, when the Spider-Man films came out, while he pressed for credit as the character's artist, he didn't push for financial gain and made it clear that he had long since abandoned the character and was now engaged with other projects.

Ditko turned down lucrative work starting up the Star Line of kids' books over the issue of whether being heroic is a decision that anyone can make at any time or, rather, was primarily or exclusively an inherent part of the make-up of a few special individuals that can be revealed but not chosen. In alignment with Rand, Ditko thought that being a hero is not a matter of special grace, not just something you are born with, ala Superman. Being a hero is something that every one of us, you and me included, can choose to become by the

way we conduct our lives. Even though it may not be easy and may take rigorous preparation and diligent hard work and personal fortitude to become a hero, it is nevertheless possible for all of us, in our own way and in our own circumstance, to be heroic. We can do more than fall at the feet of heroes, insists Ditko; we can become heroes. The creators of the series disagreed, and Ditko left them, and a much-needed paycheck, behind.

Ditko was asked to work on a new series called Dark Dominion. But after one issue, he decided that portraying the supernatural was in violation of his beliefs and he ended his association with that project. He also turned down an assignment drawing the Transformer coloring book anthology because the host character for the series was a vampire. To Rand, and Ditko, this life is it; what you see is all there is; what you do with this life is all there is going to be; what you accomplish in your private and public life and its consequences is the only legacy you will ever leave.

A comic book organization scheduled a ceremony to give Ditko an award for a distinguished career in comics, but he refused to attend. He was honored in absentia, and someone, without his knowledge or approval, accepted the award on his behalf. Thinking Ditko would be pleased, the person who accepted the award sent it to him. Ditko phoned him and said, "Awards bleed the artist and make us compete against each other. How dare you accept this on my behalf!" Ditko sent the award back.

So that's Steve Ditko. These days, Ditko, now an old man over eighty, sits every day at his drawing board drawing pictures the best he can, in the most honest way he can. With no mainstream publishing outlet, few people ever get to see them, but he does them anyway. A *New York Times* reviewer of a new book on him (see below) describes him as an artist "whose principles have ossified into bitter perversity." I guess it is all in how you look at it.

The new book and the source of the material in this thought: Blake Bell, *The World of Steve Ditko: Strange and Stranger* (Seattle: Fantographics Books, 2008).