

Death and Return of Comic Books

By Ryan Forgosh

The First Step

Something caught the eye of James Pensabene, an animation student at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, as he wandered the aisles of Barnes & Noble. It was a comic book, but it looked slightly different than the ones he'd seen in the past; smaller, the size of a paperback novel. He picked up the book, looking at it with skepticism. Flipping through the pages, James grew intrigued. Finally, he turned to the back to see the price: \$10. Abandoning his wandering, Pensabene brought the Compact Comics release of *All-Star Superman* to the register.



James Pensabene flipping through the pages of *All-Star Superman*

All-Star Superman was Pensabene's first foray into American comics, though this isn't for a lack of trying. Pensabene has gone into comic book stores before, looking to get into the medium, but has always come out more confused than when he went in. "I never really knew where to start...I've tried but always got kind of overwhelmed," Pensabene said.

Pensabene is one of many new readers being drawn into the comic book sphere. Marvel and DC, the two biggest comic book publishers, have been making new pushes throughout 2024 to bring in new readers. Through brand new versions of their most iconic characters and

reprintings of some of their classic stories at cheap prices, like the version of *All-Star Superman* purchased by Pensabene, they seek to introduce comics to a new audience.

Western comic books are notorious for not being newcomer friendly. Meanwhile the Eastern comic industry, which has been competing with American comics for years, doesn't have this issue.

“Whenever I tried getting into [comics] I just wound up going back to manga.” Pensabene said. Manga is the Japanese equivalent of American comic books, but unlike Marvel and DC, manga stories are self-contained with a beginning, middle, and end. Western comics, at least those published by Marvel and DC, tend to feature evergreen characters. Heroes like Superman or Spider-Man have decades upon decades of history ingrained in them, with each story building upon the last. It's unrealistic for someone to read through a character's entire history, so how would someone know where to start? Even if you want to only read a character's current books, there are often multiple comics being released featuring the character.

The result is that newcomers like Pensabene feel overwhelmed, and comic publishers know this. Marvel and DC don't release their sales numbers, but ComicHub, a company offering point-of-sale software to comic book stores, tracks sales at comic shops. According to ComicHub, in 2023 the best selling graphic novel from either Marvel or DC was *Supergirl: Woman of Tomorrow*, thanks in part to DC announcing that the upcoming Supergirl movie would be based largely on the comic. *Supergirl: Woman of Tomorrow* placed eighth on the sales chart far behind the first volume of the manga *Chainsaw Man*, which placed fourth.

Seeking to boost sales, DC launched its first batch of Compact Comics in June, 2024 — reprints of some of DC's most popular stories that the company believes can ease newcomers into the wider world of DC. For Batman there's a Compact Comic release of *The Court of Owls*. For Green Lantern there's *Far Sector*. And for Superman there's, of course, *All-Star Superman*.



The Compact Comics release of *Watchmen* (right) next to the standard release of *Watchmen* (left)

“It was so cheap, I figured ‘why not’,” Pensabene said on his purchase of *All-Star Superman*. DC’s Compact Comics are \$10, a fraction of the standard edition of the books. Standard editions of these would run a customer around \$30, which is a steep price to pay for a newcomer who doesn’t know what they’re getting into. \$10 meanwhile is an easier price to swallow while also bringing the price of comics more in line with manga.

“I never understood why something like this didn’t exist before,” Pensabene said. “I’m an artist. Comics are like a playground for us...I felt locked out.” But thanks to DC’s Compact Comics, Pensabene finally had a place to start. “I never understood Superman. I always thought he was just this boring, big dude. But I get it now.” After finishing *All-Star Superman*, Pensabene asked his friends what Superman comic he should read next. Or if he should pick up the Compact Comics release of *Batman: The Court of Owls* instead. DC got at least one new customer and, at least according to two comic book store owners, a whole lot more as well.

To Build a Universe

In addition to the Compact Comics, Marvel and DC have been trying to lure in new readers with brand new lines of comics. Marvel has reintroduced their “Ultimate Universe” line of books while DC has introduced a new “Absolute Universe” line.

A “universe” is where comic book stories are contained. Marvel and DC’s comic books can best be thought of as a multiverse. There are multiple different universes where the different stories occur. Some are in one universe while others are in another universe. Marvel, for example, refers to its standard comics universe as “616,” an arbitrary designation that gives fans a way to

refer to the books. This 616 universe contains all of the typical Marvel stories dating all the way back to the 1960s up until today.

When Marvel publishes a new comic with new versions of its characters, this is a new universe and receives its own numbered designation to differentiate it. Take, for example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, designated as 199999. The Spider-Man that appears there is not the same Spider-Man that fans have been reading since 1962. And the Spider-Man that appears in universe 6160, Marvel's new Ultimate Universe, is different as well. These new universes allow writers to create new takes on fan favorite characters, in the hope of reinvigorating interest in those characters.

Compact Comics

Both these new universes and Compact Comics seem to be working, according to comic shop owners. "These new books are selling like I've never seen," said Cory Brown, owner of Zapp Comics in Manalapan, New Jersey, referring to both Compact Comics and the "Absolute" and "Ultimate" universes.

"[Compact Comics] have been selling out basically as soon as we get them," said Dan Palomares, manager of another comic store, Comicopia, in Boston. Comicopia is ordering the books in batches of 60, a number virtually unheard of in today's market, especially for what are essentially just rereleases of old comics.



Image Provided by Zapp Comics showing its restock of Compact Comics

According to Comicopia's assistant manager Sam Lee, the majority of people buying the Compact Comics from Comicopia are newcomers to the hobby, suggesting that DC's strategy is working. When the first line of three Compact Comics was released in June 2024, all were in the top 10 best selling graphic novels of the month, with *Batman: The Court of Owls* holding the number two spot and *Watchmen* the number three. This is especially impressive considering they are technically just rereleases of old books that are almost always readily available for purchase.

According to Zapp Comics and Comicopia, DC's Compact Comics isn't the only newly introduced line making waves in the industry. Marvel's Ultimate Universe has also been selling like gangbusters.

Ultimate Marvel

Marvel has delved into alternate comic universes before, even attempting an Ultimate Universe all the way back in the early 2000s with the goal of modernizing its characters and acting as an entry point for readers who don't want to wade through the baggage of its main 616 universe.

"The [original] Ultimate universe was great, until it wasn't," Brown said. "A bunch of great ideas that ultimately, went to shit." The original Ultimate Universe suffered from poor writing and decisions by those in charge of it, like the choice to have an implied relationship between Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch despite them being siblings. By its end, bizarre editorial choices and subpar writing led to the Universe's demise in the story *Secret Wars* with the best aspects of the universe being folded into the main 616 continuity.

"It seems like [Marvel] is learning their lesson. At least I hope," Palomares said. "The Ultimate comics have some of the best writing I've seen in years."

This new Ultimate Universe provides features fans have long wanted. For example, Lee said that fans have been sick of Peter Parker's constant will-they won't-they relationships in the main 616 books, wanting to see him mature and settle down. So in *Ultimate Spider-Man*, Peter Parker is married to Mary Jane Watson and is a father of two kids.

"They're giving fans what they want," Lee said of the Ultimate Universe, singling out *Ultimate Spider-Man* as the best of the bunch.

And if sales are any indication, it seems audiences are enjoying the modernized takes on the characters. Fans have been begging for new stories featuring Marvel's characters outside of their typical status quo and the Ultimate Universe is delivering just that. Palomares confirmed that *Ultimate Spider-Man* has been greatly outselling the 616 *Amazing Spider-Man*.

Absolute DC

Just like Marvel, DC has seen the need for fresh takes on its classic characters. So with Absolute DC, DC is taking its most popular characters and changing just one thing about them, letting the story go from there. In the Absolute Universe, Bruce Wayne is no longer a billionaire, but rather a construction worker. Superman was not sent to Earth as a baby, but as an adult instead. And Wonder Woman was not raised by Amazons in Themyscira, but in Hell. Similar to Ultimate Marvel, there is no baggage attached to these stories, meaning issue 1 of an Absolute comic is the very beginning of the story. The creative teams behind the books wanted Absolute DC to be all new and all original, and according to the artist of *Absolute Wonder Woman* Hayden Sherman, the teams had just as much fun working on the books as fans have had reading them.

“We get to make everything from the ground up and have a lot of say in how that all works and looks,” Sherman said. DC gave the teams behind the Absolute Universe comics near full creative control of the books, leading to never before seen concepts like the aforementioned Wonder Woman from Hell and working class Batman.



A copy of *Absolute Wonder-Woman* #1 signed by Hayden Sherman

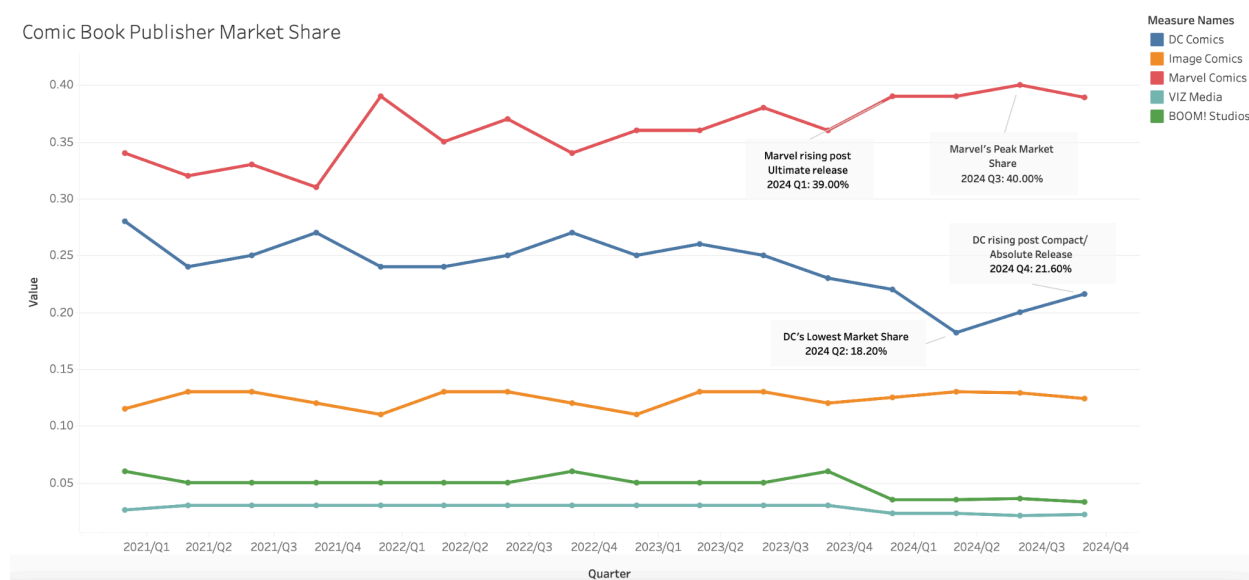
Sherman went on to emphasize their desire to bring in new readers with *Absolute Wonder Woman*, saying, “I want it to feel inviting and different enough like if people have seen Wonder Woman in the past and bounced off of it or just not picked up the book, hopefully we're doing something that's different enough here to get them to want to reach for it and open it and continue on with it.”

Based on DC's secrecy leading up to the announcement of the Absolute Universe, DC seems to share the same optimism Sherman has for the Absolute Universe.

"It took about a year from me first starting to talk about it and hear about it, slowly learning," Sherman said, emphasizing "slowly," "until earlier this year, actually knowing what the plan was. It was a long process." Sherman clarified that DC isn't normally this secretive regarding sharing plans with creatives, but this time was an exception, painting the Absolute Universe as its "next big thing."

A New Universe is Born

It has been nearly a year since the first Ultimate Marvel titles launched back in January 2024. Since then, Marvel has been releasing comic after comic featuring the Ultimate versions of its characters. Since the goal of Ultimate Marvel is to entice non-comic fans to jump on board with this brand new universe, the question remains: how successful has this initiative been for Marvel?



According to data from ComicHub, Marvel's market share in the first quarter of 2024 was a staggering 39%, the most the company had held since 2022. And this isn't even Marvel's peak for 2024. It maintained its 39% market share going into the second quarter of the year and peaked in the third quarter, achieving a 40% market share which they haven't achieved anytime in recent memory. This indicates that not only did Marvel's Ultimate initiative succeed in bringing in new readers, but also retained said readers throughout its first year.

As for DC, it didn't launch its new universe until much later into the year with the first Absolute book coming out in October. However, its Compact Comics line launched earlier in June. DC had been seeing a decline in market share since 2023, dropping from 27% in the fourth quarter

of 2022 all the way down to 18% in the second quarter of this year. But since that low point, DC has seen steady growth in the rest of the year, coinciding with the launch of both Compact Comics and Absolute DC. They are now ending the year with about 21% market share, an impressive 3% jump in only two quarters.

It is too early to tell if these numbers will remain steady in the following years, but in the short term it is safe to say that both Marvel and DC's initiatives have been successes for the companies. With the Ultimate Universe, Marvel has been able to not only increase its market share by about 4%, but maintain that throughout the year. DC meanwhile was able to dig themselves out of the hole they were in and steadily increase its share throughout the second half of the year.

Unfortunately, Marvel and DC don't release sales numbers themselves, so exactly how many comics are being sold is unknown. However, they have given some details on a few books' sales. DC said in a press release that *Absolute Batman #1* is the best selling comic book of the year, crossing over 400,000 copies sold. Although Marvel hasn't given an exact number, *Ultimate Spider-Man #1* seems to be at the very least on the heels of *Absolute Batman #1*, having had a massive seven printings throughout the year due to the demand for the book.

Why Comics?

On a frigid October 9th night, Newbury Comics, a Boston comic shop, held a signing with Bryan Lee O'Malley, the creator of the popular comic *Scott Pilgrim*. Well over 200 people lined up outside of the store, snaking all the way around the building, all awaiting their chance to meet a great of the comic book industry. While *Scott Pilgrim* isn't his favorite comic, longtime comic enthusiast Darrow Hall would never miss the opportunity to meet a comic book legend like O'Malley.

"There's just something special about comics that you don't really get from any other medium. It's hard to explain," Hall said as he inched his way closer and closer to the front of the line.

"The Ultimate comics lately have been some of the best [comics] I've read in years. [Fans] have been begging for stuff like this. Hot dad Peter Parker is all I needed to finally start reading Spider-Man again," Hall said, only half joking.

"Ultimate and Absolute kind of feel like *Scott Pilgrim* in a way," fellow comic fan Mo Ridian commented, prompting Hall to ask for clarification. "They're more character focused and it's easy to just like, read them." The two stepped forward in line, the doors to Newbury Comics in sight.

The pair greeted O'Malley with a smile and a handshake as he signed their copies of *Scott Pilgrim Vol. 1*.



Bryan Lee O'Malley at the Newbury Comics signing

“Comics are like mythology,” Ridian said, “they’re never going to really go away.”

“They’re cool,” Hall said, “there’s nowhere else where a character can just keep going and going forever with so many people writing it.”

A few weeks later on October 26th, Hall attended another signing, this time to get his copy of *Absolute Wonder Woman* autographed by Sherman at Comicopia. Despite there being a line out the door to see one of the creators of the brand new Absolute universe, Sherman took some time to remark on the current state of the comic industry as they scrawled their name on the cover of the comic.

“This is such a cool time to jump in,” Sherman said, “Take a seat, grab a book, and have fun.”