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Movies Marvel at love

By Susan Wloszczyna, USA TODAY

Admit it, guys. You forgot to buy your sweetie a Valentine's Day present.



Dr. Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) and Wolverine/Logan (Hugh Jackman) are lovers with a bit of trouble to overcome in *X-Men 2*.

Fret not. Take her to *Daredevil*, the most romantic movie opening this weekend. It also stars the sexiest man alive — besides you, of course. He even comes in holiday-appropriate gift-wrap: muscle-hugging red leather.

Yes, the plot is ripped from the pages of a comic book. But it's time to come clean about comics-inspired movies, especially those drawn from the Marvel Universe, and expose them for what they really are — grandiose soap operas that bubble over with passion and heartache. Who needs pre-fab Hallmark sentiments when an earnest superhero can say it for you?

These hellbent roller-coaster rides, which include this summer's *X-Men 2* (May 2) and *The Hulk* (June 20), often detour into the tunnel of love as the action becomes tangled in romance. After all, the signature image in last year's *Spider-Man* wasn't a showdown with villain Green Goblin. It was that kiss in the rain. The big, wet one that Tobey Maguire's costumed Peter Parker laid on Kirsten Dunst's dish-next-door Mary Jane while provocatively dangling upside-down. (**Related item:** [Sealing it with a superhero smooch.](#))

The lip smack heard round the world had enough of a ripple effect to attract not just *Spider-Man*'s young male fan base in record numbers, but also women whose youthful comic-book reading habits probably consisted of the occasional flip through *Archie*. As a result, the love affair between filmgoers and masked avengers vaulted to new emotional and box-office heights, and *Spider-Man* grossed an amazing \$404 million.

Spidey's audience "broke down to about 53% male, 47% female," says Robert Bucksbaum of box office tracker Reel Source Inc. The lesson learned for other comic spinoffs: "The young adult male is a given. So why not go after the date crowd? That's the key to exceeding box office potential." The film also succeeded in attracting as many ticket buyers above age 25 as under.

Laura Ziskin, a producer of *Spider-Man* and its sequel, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, which begins shooting in April and opens in May 2004, came late to the comic-book party but now proudly proclaims herself "an official geek."

"Many women said to me that they did not think they would like *Spider-Man* and ended up loving it. As Peter says, it's 'all about a girl.' We had to deliver on the love story. That's the universal element."

Daredevil, which just happens to have its own downpour-drenched smooch, attempts to do the same. Early in the film, blind attorney by day, vigilante by night Matt Murdock uses his other ultra-acute senses to trail the hard-to-impress Elektra, a dazzling practitioner of martial arts.

Inside a city playground, she engages the handsome stranger in feverish hand-to-hand foreplay, matching him flip for flip and kick for kick. They smile all the while, panting with pain and pleasure.

"Does every guy have to go through this to get your name?" inquires a breathless Matt, played by the aforementioned sexy title holder, Ben Affleck.

"You should try asking for my number," taunts Elektra, embodied by Jennifer Garner, the spy gal from TV's *Alias*.

These two just don't meet cute. They combat cute. "It's our version of the 'getting-to-know-you' scene," *Daredevil* director/writer Mark Steven Johnson says. "Most movies would have them walk and talk after a dinner date. We have two people fighting on a seesaw." It's the start of a beautiful relationship with plenty of emotional ups and downs.

The teasing continues in *X-Men 2*, the more romance-heavy sequel to 2000's mutant-warrior hit. "The last movie touched on that Wolverine had a crush on Jean Grey," says Famke Janssen, who plays the telekinetic brainy babe. Although Jean is engaged to laser-eyed Cyclops, "this one takes it a little further." In other words, "Wolverine makes a move, animal that he is."

The affection could grow even more intense with *The Hulk*, the comic world's answer to *Beauty and the Beast*. "Action is romance and romance is action in Ang Lee's world," writer/producer James Schamus says of the director who also was behind *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. "Jennifer Connelly's character, Betty Ross, finds herself in love with somebody she doesn't know who or what he is. Her quest to find the truth is also a quest to fully realize her love."

Meanwhile, Aussie hunk Eric Bana, whose scientist Bruce Banner develops a raging alter ego after being exposed to gamma radiation, gets to show his stuff as well. As Schamus notes, "One aspect of Hulking out is that your clothes don't fit you anymore."

These crime-fighters pack a mean punch, but they also pitch woo with a vengeance. Avi Arad, the chief of Marvel Studios, isn't kidding when he compares the doomed lovers Daredevil and Elektra to a Puccini opera such as *Madama Butterfly*.

"On paper, Elektra is too much for any man," Arad says. "Too rich, too smart, too good to be true. She should be dating a rich adventurer with two yachts. Instead, she falls for a storefront lawyer with no interest in money or success. Both know that good things don't happen for them."

Little wonder Stan Lee, co-creator of the most famous of Marvel's tormented titans, rivals only Hugh Hefner when it comes to stoking libidinous male fantasies.

But unlike the Playboy founder, Lee also is pro-commitment. Notes Arad: "Stan has been married over 50 years, and he and Joan are still on their honeymoon."

Lee didn't pay his dues toiling on pulpy romance comics in the '40s and '50s for nothing before he imagined the likes of Spider-Man and Daredevil. He invested the same real-life emotions in his often-flawed superheroes who existed not in a made-up Gotham, such as rival D.C.'s Batman, but in the actual world.

Who couldn't relate to the shy Queens teen behind the Spidey mask?

"I'm Mr. Emotion," the 80-year-old Lee admits. "Romance is so much a part of my life. How could you be oblivious to it? My taste in music is old love songs from shows like *Gigi* and *My Fair Lady*. I'm a sucker. Half of the movie of *Spider-Man* was romance. I loved it. The best part was the relationship with the girl. I wasn't expecting the personal stuff to be so compelling."

Today, when comic books mainly are sold in tucked-away specialty shops that cater to collectors instead of corner grocery stores, the male readership tends to be older teens and twentysomethings, and plots have matured. But for several generations of impressionable lads, comics served as colorful primers on the birds and the bees.

That includes Affleck, a longtime *Daredevil* devotee who would pore through comic books with his childhood pals in Cambridge, Mass., seeking clues to the mysterious opposite sex.

"When you're 12 or 13 and a boy, comic books are the only way to see how relationships might work between men and women," he says. "We'd lock ourselves in our room for two or three hours at a time. It was more than just seeing women in scant clothing and these unbelievable bodies. In some comic books like *Daredevil*, there was a real element of romance."

Of course, a superhero's approach to courtship is as unique and as defining as his superpowers. *Daredevil* may be second tier compared with the massively popular Spidey. But while Peter Parker wrestles with his sense of duty and his adolescent desires for Mary Jane, Matt Murdock has no such qualms. Director Johnson says *Daredevil* is a real devil when it comes to flirting with danger.

"He attracts all these sexy women," he says of the crimson-suited Romeo whose Juliets all too often meet untimely fates. "He always had these great, messed-up relationships. Typhoid Mary. This hot, punk chick Maniac. Ben and I were laughing that Elektra was the first woman we fell in love with. She and *Daredevil* have the best love story in the comics."

One criticism that gets hurled at comic books is their idealized if sexist depiction of women. "Most jarring to me is almost every single woman is a babe," says *X-Men*'s Janssen, a former model. "If this is what young boys are going to expect in life, they are going to be hugely disappointed."

Still, male fans see themselves in these masquerading do-gooders. "The genius of Stan Lee is he invested his heroes with human attributes," says Rob Worley of Web site Comics2Film. "You realize, 'They are like me. I have trouble with girls and my job, too.' *Spider-Man* is the ultimate geek success story, and he married a gorgeous model. He gives you hope."

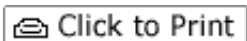
Hey, if a comic-book geek like Affleck can attract a catch like Jennifer Lopez, anything is possible. In fact, *Daredevil*'s exploits could have given him the courage to propose.

Says Johnson: "My wife, Susie, and I got married right out of high school 18 years ago. Ben said he couldn't imagine being married that long to the same person. Cut to the end of the movie. Now he's engaged." Even Stan Lee couldn't concoct a more romantic ending.

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