Strategies of Narration in Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *Spider-Man: Blue*¹

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Historically, most Marvel comics have maintained a fairly consistent point-of-view, a heterodiegetic omniscient narrator whose focal perspective is unlimited, that is, not restricted by geographic or temporal space. Often this narrative voice is linked to the comic book title's editor (e.g., Stan Lee, Danny Fingeroth, or Ralph Macchio) who updates readers on contexts and events in past issues and does so through a familiar tone that assumes shared knowledge and interests. The only access we have to a character's interior is what this omniscient narrator chooses to reveal, and often these thoughts are nothing more than reflective commentary that illustrate the hero's actions. As a result, the superheroes in these traditional Marvel comics are presented in a more objective and detached manner, viewed as central figures performing within the larger “stage” of the paneled pages. This has been the case with most Spider-Man comics.

However, in Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale’s *Spider-Man: Blue* (2003)², there is a significant shift in the narrative strategy; one that allows us a personal and more immediate association with the hero. Loeb and Sale’s take on the webslinger is unique, not only because of the inclusion of Spider-Man in their “color” limited-series for Marvel — e.g., *Daredevil: Yellow* (2002), *Hulk: Grey* (2004), and *Captain America: White* (2008) — but because they allow us to see the hero from an interior perspective. The entire *Spider-Man: Blue* run, serialized between July 2002 and April 2003, is focalized through Peter Parker himself, and without any supplemental commentary provided by a heterodiegetic narrator. What is more, the narrative is epistolary in nature, presented as a “love letter” from Parker to a dead Gwen Stacy and dictated onto a tape recorder. In their comic, Loeb and Sale transform our understanding of Spider-Man through this more intimate narrative strategy, foregoing the kind of detached, god/editor-like perspective that was common in most Marvel comics. The team not only accomplishes this through dialogue, but through the visuals as well. The composition of the images within the panels — in essence, how we see things through Parker’s perspective complement the interiority of Loeb and Sale’s text. As a result, the creators of *Spider-Man: Blue* were able to effect an empathetic and more personal narrative tone, presenting a more private storyworld than that found in any of the Spider-Man comics that came before, and doing so without compromising on the fast-paced adventure and heroism that have traditionally defined Spider-Man titles.

While significant in its own right, *Spider-Man: Blue* is not the writing team’s only notable contribution to the superhero or fantastic genres. Indeed, Loeb and Sale have a rich tradition in taking well-established characters and teams and transforming them into something singular.

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The two first worked together on a revival of Jack Kirby and Dave Wood’s *Challengers of the Unknown*, an eight-issue mini-series that ran from March to October 1991 (and later collected in the trade paperback, *Challengers of the Unknown Must Die!* [2004]). They next worked on a string of critically acclaimed *Batman* titles, including the collections *Batman: Haunted Knight* (1996), *Batman: The Long Halloween* (1998), and *Batman: Dark Victory* (2001). In addition to two other collaborations in the DC Universe—the Eisner Award-winning *Superman: A Man for All Seasons* (1999) and *Catwoman: When in Rome* (2005)—Loeb and Sale produced a series of titles for Marvel. Although their first graphic novel for the publisher was *Wolverine/Gambit: Victims* (1996), they are perhaps best known at Marvel for their various “color” series: *Daredevil: Yellow, Spider-Man: Blue, Hulk: Grey,* and *Captain America: White.* In the three completed graphic novels, Loeb and Sale differentiate their versions of the Marvel characters by privileging affection and interiority, presenting their stories through first-person narrators, each of whom is in conversation with another. Daredevil/Matt Murdock addresses his story to his and Foggy Nelson’s former secretary, Karen Page, and Bruce Banner speaks directly to his friend and psychiatrist, Dr. Leonard Sampson. What distinguishes Spider-Man’s narrative, and what makes it so significant for the present study, is the context of Peter Parker’s addressee. The person with whom he appears to be speaking, Gwen Stacy, is dead. And given this fact, one cannot help but wonder if Parker himself is the subject of his own ruminations, holding a conversation with himself in ways that make *Spider-Man: Blue* one of Marvel’s most intimate narratives to date.

What underscores this intimacy—not only for Peter Parker, but for readers as well—is the place and significance of Gwen Stacy in the Spider-Man’s, and Marvel Comics’, world. She was Parker’s first love, and, according to the *Marvel Universe Wiki*, after the death of Peter’s Uncle Ben, “no death has weighed as heavily upon Spider-Man’s shoulders as [Gwen’s] passing.” We can see this in the original death story and in the sheer number of comics in which Gwen, in some form or another, has appeared. Her death at the hands of the Green Goblin, and Spider-Man’s part in and reaction to that event, occurred in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, issues #121 and #122 (June and July 1973). Of particular significance are the details surrounding the very moment of Gwen’s death, specifically the infamous “snap!” sound effect that accompanies Spider-Man’s rescue attempts after she is thrown off of the George Washington Bridge (26/4). Many readers have interpreted that sound as Gwen’s point of death, her neck breaking as a result of Spider-Man’s webbing suddenly stopping her high-velocity fall. This raises the question, one that has haunted Peter Parker ever since: was Gwen dead before being thrown from the bridge, or did the hero’s attempted rescue cause her demise? Regardless of the ambiguity surrounding this major comic-book event, and despite any ultimate resolution readers may find for themselves, the fact remains that Gwen’s death remains a watershed in the Spider-Man series, an event that has reverberated throughout Spider-Man franchise. The reality of her death has remained a catalyst in a variety of Spider-Man narratives, including the 1970s and 1990s Clone Sagas, the “Sins Past” and “Sins Remembered” story arcs, as well as taking center stage in the alternate universe *Ultimate Spider-Man* series. Indeed, no better series of images captures the impact of (and near-obsession over) Gwen Stacy’s death than does Peter’s mirror hallucination scene in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #147 (Aug. 1975), part of the original Clone Saga storyline (4/1–3). In the top three panels of that page, Spider-Man looks into a mirror and sees running toward him an almost endless series of Gwen images, one following the other. (These panels are reminiscent of the famous scene in Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, when an aging Kane walks between two mirrors facing one another, projecting multiple images of himself that seem to recede into infinity.) Some have even maintained that the resonance
of Gwen’s death extends well beyond Marvel comics, that its brutality brings a close to the more “innocent” or idealistic Silver Age of comics and sets the stage for the more violent and ambiguous Bronze Age. To argue that Gwen’s passing is a linchpin in the Marvel Universe would be an egregious understatement.

Yet, the significance of Loeb and Sale’s Spider-Man: Blue rests not so much on its subject matter—still another Spider-Man arc centered around the death of Gwen Stacy—as much as it does on the way that the story is told. Like the other “color” series Loeb and Sale wrote for Marvel, their representation of Peter Parker’s personal world is made most effective in its manner of narration. This more subjective, first-person point-of-view is made evident through both word and image. What is more, it stands out from the more common modes of narration found in the vast majority of Marvel comics. Historically, Marvel’s various titles, including those surrounding Spider-Man, have been narrated in a relatively straightforward and traditional manner. Overshadowing the action (both physical and speech-related) that makes up the core of the story is an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, someone who is on a “higher” level of narration and completely outside of the events unfolding, and at the same time someone who never takes part in any of the action he narrates. In other words, the storyteller of most Spider-Man comics is a (mostly) faceless, detached, third-person omniscient narrator, a god-like figure who sets up and contextualizes the various events as they unfold, panel to panel.

This kind of narrator functions in several ways. First, he introduces the particular story we are about to read and provides a context that assists in the exposition, such as that found in the opening panel of The Amazing Spider-Man, issue #7, where the webslinger encounters the Vulture for the second time and the narrator describes their history in issue #2 (2/1). This type of narration becomes a crucial element of serialized comics, where an awareness of the events in a previous issue is indispensable for our understanding of the comic we are currently reading. The narrator fills us in, or reminds us, of the actions from the previous month’s issue(s) so that we can pick up where that issue—or where several previous issues—left off. Another function of the traditional Marvel narrator concerns levels of dramatic knowledge. In this instance, the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator reveals information that a character (Spider-Man himself or some other) does not have, thereby creating suspense. Such a strategy is used in The Amazing Spider-Man, issue #29, when the narrator fills us in on consequences of which Spider-Man is currently unaware: “Thus, though he doesn’t suspect it at the time, Spidey’s plan actually backfires against him...” (6/4). Goaded by questions such as “Who knows what?”, “What doesn’t a character know?”, and “When will they find out?”, the reader feels him- or herself propelled through the story through sheer anticipation and continues to turn the pages. A third purpose behind this kind of point-of-view is clarification through editorial aside. In these instances, a character’s words inside a speech balloon will contain an asterisk, and accompanying that will be very brief mentioning of an event that occurred one or more issues back. Sometimes the reference will be to an action that took place in the same comic-book series, but just as many references will be to completely different Marvel titles that nonetheless elucidate the current storyline. Often these narrative asides are informal in tone, even humorous, and they are almost always signed by the Marvel title’s editor (e.g., “The Scarlet Spider was buried beneath fall rubble last issue, remember? — Eric [Fein],” “See Web of Spider-Man #121 — Danny [Fingeroth],” and “Way back in the semi-classic issue #182 — Semi-classic Ralf [Macchio].”). In this way, these editorial contexts are less faceless and more chummy, creating a kind of “insider knowledge” and a sense of pop cultural exclusivity commonly found with fans of Marvel comics. This is similar to still another function
of the Marvel omniscient narrator: to create a feeling of shared experience that will secure and sustain a reading audience. Such narrative posturing, often playfully exaggerated, was especially common to Marvel comics in the 1960s and 1970s (like that found in the concluding panel of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, issue #31, where the narrator implores the reader to pick up the next issue, and that “[b]ecause you’re our kind of reader, we offer this admonishment — you must not miss it! ‘Nuff said!” [20/9]) and it was an appeal to the “true believers” that they were in on something special, which thereby made them special readers. Yet regardless of its function (exposition, level of knowledge, editorial aside, or shared community) this kind of extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrative voice is always detached and marked by zero focalization, that is, a non-locatable and indeterminate perceptual position. If there is any “personality” to the narration, its goal for immediacy is between the author/editor and reader, not between the character (i.e., Peter Parker) and the reader.

Yet, while more recent *Spider-Man* comics may not rely on the exact same kinds of narrative strategies commonly found in older pre-Modern Age titles, they nonetheless privilege a third-person omniscient narrator of some sort, usually marked by the absence of a direct voice, but whose presence is evident through a zero focalization when it comes to the narrative’s presentation.\(^\text{11}\) Such is not the case with *Spider-Man: Blue*. In this work, Loeb and Sale forego any external, non-engaged narration and place that task solely in the hands, or the voice, of the protagonist. What is more, the art complements Peter Parker’s verbal directness to create a comic that is much more immediate and personal than almost anything found in the Spider-Man universe. Loeb and Sale are able to effect this kind of readely engagement through at least five different aspects of their narrative strategy: Parker’s role as the only narrating voice, the context of his narration, his function as the narrative’s focalizer, the frequency of visual close-ups, and the angle and perspective of the comic panels.

Over the entire six-issue run, Peter Parker functions as the sole external, or extradiegetic, narrator. Outside of the voices that are heard within the narrative itself, the intradiegetic speech events that make up the story proper (i.e., the first narrative level), Parker’s is the only perspective we have outside of the first-narrative actions, guiding us through the story. His is a retrospective voice, relating events that are years in the past (thus, a largely analeptic narrative) and visualized through the blue-tinted dialogue boxes that are present in the text. Indeed, the blue of the dialogue boxes not only corresponds to the color theme of the text, but, more significantly, it underscores the somber tone of the book and helps to enhance the closeness we as readers feel for Parker as narrator.\(^\text{12}\) He is a homodiegetic narrator throughout, but only in the last three pages does Peter Parker relinquish his role as a narrator separated by temporal distance. There we see the present-day Parker who has been telling us his story of Gwen Stacy, and the mood of the narrative — the distance between events and the narrating of them — shifts from one of diegesis, or one of telling, to mimesis, that which is shown. Here we find a solitary Peter Parker, alone in his attic talking into a tape recorder to a former lover who is now dead. And although Mary Jane arrives on the scene to lend support to her somber husband, the panel framing on these last pages denies Peter any intimacy. Outside of a close-up of his and Mary Jane’s fingers touching on the penultimate page of the story, Peter is never presented in frame with the person to whom he is now the closest. He is always presented as an isolated figure, sharing panel space with no one. If, before this elucidating moment, we had not fully realized the melancholy and highly personal tone produced by the comic’s narrating presence, in the last three pages of *Spider-Man: Blue* Loeb and Sale drive that point home. Parker’s role as the book’s first-person narrator, and only narrator, is highlighted by the overriding solitariness of his situation. And it is this sense of aloneness that helps produce the intimacy generated by the text.
Another way in which Loeb and Sale engender reader empathy is through the context of Parker’s narration. It is Valentine’s Day, and he is speaking to Gwen Stacy, a figure that he refers to in the past tense. And we learn relatively early on that he is talking into a tape recorder. Not only are there sound effect clues that suggest as much—the “whrrr” and “klik” that appear at the beginning and end of almost all six chapters—but he states directly at the very beginning of the second chapter, “So here I am with this tape recorder.” The sadness of this situation, a lone figure speaking into a tape recorder to a person who is now dead, is enough to bind readers to the protagonist through sympathy and sentimentality. This emotional pull is further enhanced by the ramifications of Parker’s narrating speech act. Since Gwen is now dead and can no longer receive or respond to his words, the only logical audience for Peter’s recorded musings is Peter himself. In other words, the narrating frame of Spider-Man: Blue is a man talking with himself, using the story of Gwen Stacy—or, as Parker states it in the opening pages of the book, “the story of how we fell in love. Or more appropriately, how we almost didn’t fall in love”—as a form of therapy to better understand his own psyche. This is the kind of reader-protagonist closeness that could not easily be generated through the kind of omniscient narrative practices found in the vast majority of Marvel comics.

Focalization is a third way in which Loeb and Sale particularize their narrative. Given the fact that Peter Parker is the book’s homodiegetic intradiegetic narrator, it only makes sense that he is the primary focalizer. Indeed almost every bit of information that we receive in the book is filtered through Peter’s consciousness, and every image framed within the panels is something that he would have seen. The apparent exceptions to this (e.g., Mary Jane talking with Aunt May at the end of Chapter 1, the Rhino breaking out of his enclosure in Chapter 2, Blackie’s fight with the Vulture in Chapter 4, and Kraven’s stalking in Chapters 5 and 6) occur outside of Parker’s awareness. However, if Parker’s retrospective narration functions on an extra-diegetic level—that is, outside of the first narrative level, which is the story of his relationship with Gwen—then he would certainly have been able go back and fill in the gaps of his past knowledge and in his present narration, the story he is currently telling, provide the information as if he had experienced it at the time of its occurrence. In other words, Peter as reflective narrator has the luxury of going back, before the current telling, to find the various pieces of his story and put them together in a coherent and presentable whole. So even the events that are seemingly outside of his awareness become plausible representations of his skills both as a crime fighter (finding the clues and missing pieces) and as a narrator (pulling together all of his information, regardless of first-hand experience, into a series of interlinked sequential events).

Yet, Peter’s verbal reconstruction is not the only component of the book’s unique approach to narration. The art of Spider-Man: Blue also suggests a first-person point-of-view and as such, contributes to its rather familiar tone. One way that Sale accomplishes this is through an abundance of close-ups. Much more so than in other Spider-Man comics, the frequency of tight shots (that is, images that frame individuals from a short distance at least from the chest up), as well as objects that are shown consuming the entire panel. Almost every page in the comic contains at least one close-up or an extreme close-up of a head, a facial feature, a hand or fist, a visual glance, or an item that is the subject of that glance. By populating his pages with such paneling, Sale emphasizes the closeness of the text, a strategy that works hand-in-hand with the story’s intimate first-person narration.

The artwork’s visual line and angle of presentation function similarly. Throughout the text, the composition and perspective within the panels—the placement of the comic’s “camera eye” in relation to its subjects and the angle at which it is positioned—complements the
empathy generated by Peter’s words and the closeness we as readers feel to the narrator. There are many panels where characters are looking directly out at the reader, as if the reader were a stand-in for Peter Parker as he experiences the events. These can be seen, for example, during the first appearance of the Green Goblin in Chapter 1, Gwen Stacy’s coy glance at Peter toward the end of that same chapter, the Lizard crawling toward Spider-Man in Chapter 3, Harry Osborne answering the door at the beginning of Chapter 5, and Kraven crashing through the apartment window in the final chapter of the book. This kind of visual presentation prompts identification with the narrator, allowing us to more easily slip into his skin, so to speak, thereby underscoring Loeb and Sale’s first-person approach. Nowhere does this visual narrative strategy become more evident than on the last page of Chapter 2, where Peter meets Mary Jane for the first time. This image is presented as a full-page panel, with Mary Jane voluptuously consuming the entire spread, looking directly into the reader’s (and thus, Peter’s) eyes and uttering her now-famous line, “Facc it, Tiger, you just hit the jackpot!” It is as if she says this directly to the readers, suggesting for us some kind of identification or rapport with Peter Parker. The full effect of this visual, and the significance of Loeb and Sale’s approach to narration, becomes even more evident when compared to the original scene to which they are alluding. The very first meeting of Peter and Mary Jane took place in The Amazing Spider-Man #42 (20/6), and the way that John Romita drew that encounter is strikingly different from that found in Spider-Man: Blue. In contrast to Sale’s head-on and direct staging of Mary Jane, Romita has the character looking off to the side, addressing a Peter whose face we actually see on the left edge of the panel. Whereas the earlier visualization of this first-time encounter is highly effective in its own way—we get the speechlessness of Peter in the presence of the red-haired beauty—it’s composition is of a kind with the Marvel narrative style of old: a more omniscient and detached presentation. (What is more, by including Parker in the frame, Romita’s art works against any direct identification with the protagonist since we see him as part of the paneled landscape.) Sale’s revisional of this scene, on the other hand, ensures more of an affinity with Peter Parker, thereby supplementing the direct homodiegetic presentation of the narrative, which in this case includes both Peter’s words and the tape recorder sound effects.

In all, Loeb and Sale’s various narrative strategies provide a Spider-Man story that is significantly different from the many comics that had come before, and that have appeared since. Their choice to present Spider-Man: Blue from Peter Parker’s perspective, a homodiegetic intradiegetic narrator, creates a sense of empathy that is not as evident in the more traditional Marvel comics. Instead of relying on a detached, god-like narrator who hovers over all of the events, Loeb and Sale opt for a more engaged viewpoint that places the reader at the center of the action. They accomplish this not only through the actual story that Parker tells, and the manner and context in which he tells it, but through the visuals that he would have been encountered as he had lived the experiences. The reader sees many things that Spider-Man/Parker would have, thereby accentuating the direct and participatory effect of the diegesis. In presenting their narrative in this way, Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale have created a Spider-Man story that, while focusing on a series of events that had been told several times before, comes across as fresh and unique, introducing us to a storyworld that we many not really have known before.

NOTES

1. The citation style in this essay is based on the website, "Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide," produced by the Popular Culture Association’s Comic Art and Comics Area (http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html). As such, writers (w) are distinguished from artists (a) in the Works Cited, and
references to specific comic book passages are made parenthetically within the text, citing both the page number and the panel number, separated by a slash.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Spider-Man: Blue will be to the collected edition, not the six individual comic books that originally composed the mini-series.


5. Daredevil: Yellow, Spider-Man: Blue, and Hulk: Gray were all originally six-issue mini-series published, respectively, between August 2001 and January 2002, July 2002 and April 2003, and December 2003 and April 2004. Although Marvel released Captain America: White issue #0 in September 2003, the series ceased publication after that and remains incomplete to this day.

6. These two issues were later collected in a larger volume, Spider-Man Death of the Stacys (2007), where Gwen's death is placed alongside that of her father, Captain George Stacy, at the hands of Doctor Octopus (The Amazing Spider-Man, issues #88–92, Sept. 1970-Jan. 1971), making for a broader context that establishes greater tensions between Gwen and the webslinger.

7. Gwen's death remains an open question, and the evidence for and against Parker's culpability is conflicting. For example, in Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross's Marvels (1994, originally serialized January-August 1994), news photographer Phil Sheldon says after witnessing the death of Gwen Stacy, "I read later that it was the shock of the fall that killed her." On the other hand, in one of the Civil War event titles, Iron Man, Captain America: Casualties of War (2007), Iron Man urges for the necessity of superhero registration, and cites as an example Gwen's death: "If [Spider-Man] had been properly trained, maybe he could have broken her fall without breaking her neck." However, the same year as Iron Man's speculations, the author of the Gwen Stacy death story, Gerry Conway, stated the uncertainty of his original intentions: "Did I add the 'snap' sound effect at the last minute, or did I always plan to raise questions about our hero's contribution to his loved one's final fate? That is a question that can't really be answered (because it depends) on some very human memories of events long past, and memory, as any psychologist will tell you, is self-deceiving. Truth is ambiguous" (5). And in his book, The Physics of Superheroes, James Kakalios argues that the physics surrounding the incident suggest that her neck was indeed broken when Spider-Man suddenly stopped her fall. Still, no one has adequately answered the question of whether or not Gwen was dead before the fall and if her broken neck occurred post-mortem. Regardless, since that moment on the bridge, Peter blames himself for Gwen's demise, and his obsession over this fact has been a component of innumerable Spider-Man comics.

8. The 1970s clone storyline has been collected in The Amazing Spider-Man: The Original Clone Saga (2011), the later (and much longer) clone saga issues of the 1990s make up the five-volume Spider-Man: The Clone Saga Epic (2010–2011), "Sins Past" was collected in The Amazing Spider-Man, Vol. 8: Sins Past (2005), and "Sins Remembered" was published as a volume in The Spectacular Spider-Man, Vol. 5: Sins Remembered (2005). Gwen's death becomes another major event in Ultimate Spider-Man #62 (Sept. 2004), this time at the hands of Carnage, and, similar to the regular Spider-Man event, she also plays a major role in the title's subsequent clone saga (issues #97–105, Sept. 2006–April 2007).

9. See, for example, Arnold T. Blumberg's reading of Gwen's death as a transitional event between the optimism found in 1960s comics and the more gritty, world-conscious characters and stories beginning in the early 1970s.

10. For fuller descriptions of these and other narratological terms used in this essay, see Gérard Genette's Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1980) and Narrative Discourse Revisited (1988).

11. There are exceptions to this, of course, such as The Spectacular Spider-Man #8 and The Web of Spider-Man #122, where the protagonist is the book's narrator. However, these deviations from the standard Marvel omniscience are a rarity.

12. None of Loeb and Sale's other "color" books for Marvel bears the same characteristic. The colors of the first-person dialogue boxes in Daredevil: Yellow, Hulk: Gray, and Captain America: White have no overt connection to the theme of their respective texts.

13. There are no sound effects at the end of Chapter I. Other than that, these sounds open and close each installment.
WORKS CITED


