

MAY 13, 2016, 10:56 PM

LAST UPDATED: SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2016, 10:19 AM

Superheroes on big screen are big hit for comic shops

BY ANDREW WYRICH

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

Millions flocked to the multiplex last weekend to watch Captain America and Iron Man preside over an internecine — and predictably violent — slugfest between rival factions of superheroes. In March, many of the same fans took in a cinematic duel between Batman and Superman that played out on the rooftops of Gotham City. And the latest X-Men reboot is due in theaters later this month.

The commercial success of these films — and dozens of other superhero adaptations that have found their way to television and movie screens in the last decade — have rekindled an interest in the source material on which they are based: comic books.

Owners of comic shops in North Jersey say they have been blessed with loyal customers. But the popularity of recent superhero movies is bringing newer, and younger, readers to their stores, they say, drawn by an insatiable desire to know more about the characters they see on the big screen.

“We’re definitely getting a lot of customers who come in after they’ve seen a movie or just finished the latest season of something; they finish the season and end up coming in for the latest trade paperback,” said Len Katz, who owns The Joker’s Child in Fair Lawn with his wife, Caren.

Katz added that he expects the release last week of “Captain America: Civil War” — which took in nearly \$182 million in its opening weekend in North America and is loosely based on a wildly successful series of comics from 2006 — to drive fans to his store. The “Civil War” comics were on prominent display there last week in the days before the movie’s release.

The bump in business that Katz and other local comic store owners have seen is reflected in national sales figures. Sales of comics and graphic novels in the United States and Canada reached \$935 million in 2014, according to the most recent available data from Comichron.com and ICv2, websites that track comic sales data. In 2005, when the film “Batman Begins” was released and more-or-less reignited the comic book movie genre, overall sales were between \$475 million and \$550 million, according to Comichron.com.

It’s impossible to say how much of the increase is attributable to a new generation of fans who became enraptured watching Thor swinging Mjöllnir or Batman saving Gotham City from a time bomb. Still, North Jersey comic store owners say there is no denying that the success of the movies and television shows has trickled down to their businesses.

Katz said he believed that “about half” of first-time customers at his store are looking for something related to a recent superhero movie or television series. Other store owners agreed.

Tony DeMarco, who owns A&S Comics in Teaneck, said about a quarter of his new customers — many of whom are younger — come in looking for something related to a recent superhero movie or television series. He said the store has dedicated an area for younger readers — a starter section of sorts where they can get their bearings before moving on to more challenging titles.

“The parents take their kids to the movies and then they read more and it spikes their interest,” he said. “We’ve had people come in here and say, ‘My child wouldn’t read anything and ... he saw a Batman movie or Superman movie and all of a sudden he wants to read.’”

DeMarco said he has also observed that the stigma that has attached itself to comics fandom as the exclusive province of nerds has started to fall away with the proliferation of popular characters into mainstream culture.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sybil Pabatao, 25, of Leonia at The Joker's Child in Fair Lawn.

"It used to be if you read comics, people might have kept that quiet," he said, laughing. "Not anymore. Look at the Comic Con in New York, how many people show up. It sells out in minutes on the Internet. It's crazy."

Comic book fans in New Jersey will have several opportunities to feed their passion at conventions this year. The second annual Boardwalk Con started Friday in Atlantic City, and the Garden State Comic Fest will take over the William G. Mennen Sports Arena in Morristown for two days in July.

The introduction of new characters into popular movie franchises also generates buzz, DeMarco said. He cited the big-screen debut in "Civil War" of Black Panther.

"He was an old-time character; Jack Kirby invented him back in the 1970s," DeMarco said, referring to the influential comic book writer whose creations include Captain America, Hulk and the X-Men. "Now they've incorporated him in the 'Civil War' movie, and we sold out the new volume of the Black Panther comic, issue one, in, like, two weeks. We had over 100 copies. We're a small store compared to others, but that is huge for us."

Ben Lichtenstein, the owner of Zapp Comics in Wayne, said the recent superhero movies even mirror the structure of comic books to a degree. The films often have credit sequences that are designed to stir the same level of anxious anticipation for a sequel or spinoff that loyal comics readers tend to harbor for the next issue. He cited a scene that followed the credits to the first "Iron Man" movie starring Robert Downey Jr. in which Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury introduces Downey's Tony Stark to the Avengers Initiative — a development that would drive a series of blockbuster sequels.

"When that first 'Iron Man' movie came out in 2008, that's when things really started to click," Lichtenstein said.

In addition to new readers, Lichtenstein said, his shop has seen many comic book fans return to the medium after a hiatus. Many are surprised to find comics of higher narrative and artistic quality than they remember, he said.

"A lot of people say they were reading in their youth, or say during the 1990s, but got burnt out on it," he said. "I think the current market is much more of a 'real demand,' and sincere interest. It appears to me that the interest in superheroes is at an all-time high."

For a sign of the renewed passion for comic books, perhaps no occasion is a better showcase than the annual "Free Comic Book Day," when publishers distribute exclusive comics for shops to give away. On this year's Free Comic Book Day, last Saturday, Caren Katz, of the Joker's Child, said the line of eager fans — many of them in costumes — waiting to get into the store wrapped around their building, as it does each year.

Sales of toys and other superhero knickknacks also are on the rise, becoming a reliable source of revenue for comic stores, owners say.

"When we first started our business 35 years ago, it was comic books and that was it," said DeMarco, of A&S Comics. "There was nothing but books, but now they are always coming out with new things. We have to be on top of the new stuff"

Comics stores are likely to enjoy continued success if current tastes hold steady; about 20 superhero films have been approved by Marvel Studios and Warner Bros., which produces films featuring D.C. Comics characters, for release through 2019. These include a starring role for Wonder Woman, who had a bit part in "Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice."

"For us, we've been just on an upward trend," Lichtenstein said. "Each year we do more sales than the previous year; we just keep growing and growing."

Email: wyrich@northjersey.com; Twitter: @AndrewWyrich

SUBSCRIBE TO **The Record** CALL (888) 504-4280