

A Hero of Unapparent Magnitude

By

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When I was a boy, maybe twelve or thirteen years of age, I came upon a used book store close to my home. I walked in to smell the typical musty odor associated with old books. I saw there were a number of aisles filled top to bottom with old literature, self-help, children's, young-adult and how-to books; you name it. None of that mattered because I never walked more than four feet past the main entrance. There on the shelf in front of me was a scattered array of old comic books I had never heard of before. I kneeled down and painstakingly looked at everyone of them. There were titles like "The Hands of the Dragon," "The Tomb of Dracula," and "The Scorpion." Those are only some of the ones I can remember specifically. Yet still in that scattered stack I found a treasure that would change how I would read comic books from then on. I found an old title that looked terribly interesting and somewhat familiar. Days later, I would realize where I had seen this character before. It was in the premier episode of "My Secret Identity," a television show that aired in 1988 about a boy who was struck with a beam of radioactive energy that gives him superpowers. That character, Andrew Clements, sifted through his comic books and opened one book in particular (what I now know to be "What If" issue 15) that showed a teenage boy being struck by a similar beam of energy. The same superhero who's comic book I was now holding; The first issue. My boyish imagination was in "overload." This title called to me unlike anything I had seen before: The dynamic position of the hero flying across the cover, the ominous green beam of light emitted from a space-ship engulfing an unsuspecting boy, the depiction of a spectacular battle along a cityscape and the words atop the

cover which read: *The Man Called Nova*. Who is Nova and how has this galactic hero impacted modern pop culture? Continue reading, you're about to find out.

Nova was created by Marv Wolfman who has worked for both DC and Marvel Comics. Some of the characters he created include Blade, Black-Cat, Bullseye, Vigilante and that only scratches the surface. He's worked on Daredevil, Thor, Fantastic Four and Amazing Spider-Man. Nova's true origins go further back a decade before the premier issue where Wolfman's initial idea for the character showed up in the pages of a non-Marvel book. In an article titled "A Star Is Born" in Nova magazine by Eaglemoss Publications, Wolfman explains about Nova that "Nova came out of a previous character [he] had created in [his] fanzine [*Super Adventures*] called the Star. He was a rather humorous character - or at least [he] intended him to be. In one issue the Star was altered by a beam from space and turned into Black Nova" (Jackson 17). In 1976, Wolfman re-envisioned the Star into what ultimately became Marvel Comics' Nova. Wolfman worked on the series with the primary artists being: John Buscema, Sal Buscema and Carmine Infantino for the original twenty-five issue run which began in September of 1976. The main character, Richard Rider was an ordinary teenager when on one fateful day he was blasted by a beam of energy that gave him super-human abilities and led him to become the hero called Nova. That beam transferred powers from Rhomann Dey, an intergalactic policeman, from the alien world Xandar, called the Nova Corps. Dey was in pursuit of the villain: Zorr and was struck with a mortal wound. His hope was that whoever received his powers would be able to stop Zorr. That beam of energy forever changed the life of Richard Rider and it would be he who would face Zorr in battle.

In the book: *Marvel Universe*, Peter Sanderson explains that when Marv Wolfman created Nova, he was meant to be "...that decade's counterpart to Spider-Man. Like Peter Parker in his original tales, Richard Rider was a teenager in high school; unlike Parker, he had living parents and a brother. Whereas Spider-Man was usually confined to New York City, Nova, though based in Long Island, eventually discovered his sphere of operations included outer space" (Sanderson 169). The premier issue of Nova had the written proclamation: "In the marvelous tradition of Spider-Man" on the cover which alluded to similarities, but like every teenager in life, they experienced the world in different ways. Wolfman realized his own vision of what his character should be. In the foreword for *Rocket Boosters* magazine, Wolfman stated that "Nova was one of his favorite characters because he was created with the idea of putting the fun back into a Marvel that had grown increasingly serious over the years...[Wolfman] wanted to return to the spirit of the old Spider-Man and Fantastic Four books, the ones that were aimed at younger readers rather than older ones" (Smith 1). Wolfman wanted to employ family values in his comic and went as far as to have Rider reveal his identity as Nova to his brother and parents. Throughout the first twenty-five issues, there were cameo's from Spider-Man as well as members of the Avengers. Zorr wouldn't be the only villain that Nova would cross paths with. He developed his own "rogues gallery" that included the characters: Powerhouse, Condor, Diamondhead, Megaman and the mighty Sphinx who would become Nova's arch-enemy. The original series ended with issue twenty-five, but the story that began continued in the pages of *Fantastic Four* and *Rom* where Nova aided the Xandarians in an intergalactic battle against the Skrulls as well as helping to defeat Sphinx who became much more powerful than even Nova

could handle. When the fight was over so were Richard Rider's days as Nova. He lost his powers and was sent home to live the rest of his life as a mere mortal once again...so he thought.

In 1990 Fabian Nicieza was an established writer working for Marvel Comics and after writing for a few titles, he began work on a new series titled *The New Warriors*. The team was created by Tom DeFalco in the pages of *The Mighty Thor* and passed on to Nicieza for development. On the team were the group of teenagers: Night Thrasher, Marvel Boy, Firestar, Namorita, Speedball as well as Nova who's character was given new life for a new age, although temporarily taking on the name "Kid Nova." According to Mario Muscar in an article titled "Nova: Burning Bright" for *Comics Now Magazine*, we find Richard Rider with his life in danger, being dangled over the ledge of a high building by the mysterious Night Thrasher. Night Thrasher berates Rider, wanting him to use his powers as Nova, a task Rider is certain he can't perform. Seeing Rider's failure, Night Thrasher drops him, leaving Rider to plummet several stories before his powers kick in and he is once again flying...the powers laid dormant in Rider, waiting for some extreme moment to kickstart them (Muscar 8). Nova was back and soon so was his self-titled comic. *Nova issue 1* was released in 1994 with Fabian Nicieza as the writer. Nicieza's take on the "Human Rocket" was different than that of Marv Wolfman. Richard Rider wasn't a shy and uncertain teenager instead he was a tough and rugged young man with a pony-tail living on his own and running a courier business as Nova called "Nova Express" in order to pay the bills. One of the major and most popular stories that Nicieza penned was "Starlost" which took place in the pages of *The New Warriors* comic issues 40 through 42. Mario Muscar explains that in this story "A Xandarian named Garthan Saal, who was driven mad after possessing the entire power of the "Nova Force," attacks Nova. Saal, now known as Supernova,

takes Richard Rider back to a dying Xandar, where they merge into one being in full control of the “Nova Force.” Rider takes control and saves Xandar once more” (Muscar 9). This is the point where Richard Rider discovers that there are others who possess Nova Force. They all together form the Nova Corps. There were comparisons to The Green Lantern Corps of DC Comics but Niecieza stated in an interview for *Rocket Boosters* titled “Chatting With the Chief Warrior- Fabian Niecieza” that this was because he “wanted more of a Green Lantern-esque concept in the Marvel Universe (Smith 16). His take on Nova didn’t seem to work out much better than Wolfman’s because the second volume only lasted eighteen issues. Nova was once again cancelled, that is, until years later when a Nova fan would give it a try.

In the late 80’s and early 90’s, Erik Larsen was one of the hottest creators in the comic industry who worked for both DC and Marvel Comics until 1992 when he opted to venture on his own and became one of the founding members of Image comics where he worked on his own character: The Savage Dragon. He was also a fan of Nova. In a self-written article for *Rocket Boosters* titled “One (Nova) Fan’s Opinion,” Larsen describes just how much of a fan he was of the original twenty-five issue run when he stated: “Nova was everything I wanted from a comic! Nova had this bitchin’ black and gold costume and he could fly and he was strong and he was just starting out and he wasn’t exactly sure what his powers were or how to use them. And it wasn’t JUST that he was the ONLY new guy around and therefore the only game in town—it was more than that. Nova rocked” (Smith 24). Larsen, being the fan that he was, got a chance to work on Nova in 1999. The hero returned in a new comic book and this time around it was titled *Nova: The Human Rocket*. He brought it back to the original style that Marv Wolfman introduced years before. Gone was the pony-tail, with it the “Nova Express” courier service and

the grittiness of the hero from the second volume. Richard Rider was once again the unsure boy that readers first met in 1976. The heroes that showed up for cameo appearances in the original run once again made appearances which created more of a continuation of sorts. Larsen brought back Nova's original rogue's gallery including the Sphinx for another epic showdown. Then, just as the previous volumes had ended, Nova's adventures were cut short with the cancellation of volume three after only seven issues. It seemed like only something universe shattering could turn things around for Nova. Seven years later, that's exactly what happened.

In 2006, Marvel Comics published a major storyline that involved nearly all of its cosmic characters. That story was "Annihilation." It was written by Keith Giffen and was preceded by *Annihilation: Nova* written by Dan Abnett & Andy Lanning. *Annihilation* tells a story where a large fleet of ships dubbed the Annihilation Wave and led by the evil "Annihilus" attack from the Negative Zone. When Xandar is decimated by the wave, Richard Rider is left to be the last surviving Nova Corps member, he also becomes exponentially more powerful when he is forced to retain the entire Nova Force while becoming the host to an artificial intelligence called The Worldmind. The Worldmind is a sentient being and the entire collective of all Xandarian knowledge. The Worldmind would speak to Rider as well as aid him with controlling the might of the Nova Force. This process included an upgrade of his Nova uniform into a sleeker armored version of the original. Nova was redefined in the Marvel Universe by these events. In a recent piece done by David Harper for sktchd.com where he reexamines *Annihilation* with all who helped make it such a landmark storyline, Harper spoke with all of the architects including Andy Schmidt (editor of *Annihilation*) and Andy Lanning. Andy Schmidt clarified that "[They] knew at the beginning that Nova was the main character. This was Nova's

story [They] made the prologue zero in on him and just make him this kid so that when all of these bad things start happening around him, hopefully the idea was to get the readers caught up in (the idea) this kid is in shock because he's never seen anything like this and he's way out of his depth" (Harper). Andy Lanning continued the conversation by adding "The whole idea (was) [Nova] had to be at his absolute lowest low in order for him to find out that he was a hero again" (Harper). *Annihilation* changed Richard Rider the character. He finally evolved into something new while becoming a leader and turning into man who along with other cosmic heroes by his side had the weight of the universe on his shoulders. Nova's newfound strength also made him a formidable opponent. These new powers, however, did not come without a price. Mario Muscar adds in his previously noted article that "like Garthan Saal before him, Rider [was] now on the brink of losing his sanity from housing all of the Nova Force within him...along the journey, Nova encounters another Marvel cosmic mainstay, Drax the Destroyer, who helps Nova come to grips with the nearly limitless power inside of him" (Muscar 13). This circumstance did not make things easy for Richard Rider. At the story's climax, Nova made the striking blow that killed Annihilus and ended his reign of terror. It was a defining moment for Richard Rider and the moment that Nova became an A-list character in the Marvel Universe.

After *Annihilation*, Nova once again received a self-titled ongoing series written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning. This time around, Nova stayed mostly away from earth and kept the majority of his journeys on a cosmic level. Those travels included helping various alien races throughout the galaxy and a reestablishment of the Nova Corps, which included his own brother, Robert Rider. Throughout all of this, Nova once again came face to face with his arch-nemesis, The Sphinx. Soon after, Richard Rider would once again be tested on a grander scale in a story

where everything that happened since *Annihilation* was only prelude to one event: *The Thanos Imperative*.

The Thanos Imperative was written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning. Creatures from another universe dubbed the “Cancer-verse” invade with the purpose of destroy and conquer. Along with these fearsome monsters, uncanny versions of heroes and villains led by Lord Marvel, a dark mirror-image of the former Captain Marvel. He is searching for the “Avatar of Death” to help them conquer this universe. That means Thanos. Nova needs to use all of his knowledge and experience from the “Annihilation War” and his subsequent adventures to help in this crisis, however, there is no way he’ll be able to do it alone. Ronan, Gladiator, Major Victory, Silver Surfer, Quasar, Beta-Ray Bill, Star-Lord and The Guardians of the Galaxy are only part of the frontline that exists to stop the invaders from the “Cancer-verse.” During an interview with Matt Adler for Broken Frontier website titled “Abnett and Lanning Unleash The Thanos Imperative,” both Abnett and Lanning revealed the importance they placed on Nova as a character in this storyline where they stated: “Nova and The Guardians will be front and center during the story as they will be donning the roles they've played during the Annihilation War as galactic defenders in an all-out cosmic war-zone. For the Guardians it's their job title, for Nova, it's all about being one of the last remaining galactic peacekeepers during and all out invasion on a universal scale” (Broken Frontier). The final battle takes place within that alternate universe and the result of the combat causes its collapse. As this happens, Nova and Star-Lord send everyone back home leaving them to finish the fight with Thanos so he cannot escape. They remained there within the “Cancer-verse” as it collapses upon itself making a final run at Thanos. A regular comic reader would fully expect to have this “cliffhanger” resolved in the

next installment of Nova or GOTG, but instead Nova was cancelled and GOTG was soon to be restarted at issue 1. What were fans left with? A single image of Quasar and Rocket Raccoon looking up at a statue of Nova and Star-lord, a memorial with a plaque which read simply: Richard Rider “Nova.” He was gone, but all comic book fans know that in this medium, “death” doesn’t mean forever...not even for Nova.

A year later, at the end of 2011, Marvel Comics started promoting something they had in the works for the following year beginning with a comic book “one-shot” titled *Point One*. Marvel released preview images of various characters with the statement: “The Foundation of 2012 is Here!” One promotional image in particular displayed a clear image of Nova...sorta. A 2011 interview with Marvel Comics Editor-in-Chief, Axel Alonso titled “Inside ‘Point-One.’” for Comic Book Resources website revealed that Jeph Loeb and Ed McGuinnss were taking on a new approach to the Nova mythos. Alonso explains “Jeph has a strong vision for who Nova should be in the Marvel Universe, and Ed is the perfect artist because he has power that can't be contained on the page - kinda like Nova himself. I'm not going to say much more about our future plans for Nova, but I will say that [the "Point One" story] is a glimpse of the character as you'll see him in 2012” (CBR). Eventually it was revealed that the Nova he was referring to wouldn’t be Richard Rider. Rather it would be a young boy named Sam Alexander who would be a different version of the Nova Corps. He receives his powers when he puts on his father’s helmet who was once a member of the “Black Novas.” Jeph Loeb created Sam Alexander and the “Black Nova’s” in order to tell new stories that revolve around the Nova Corps. (An interesting side note: Loeb named the character after his own son Sam who died of bone cancer in 2005.) In an interview conducted by Newsarama website titled “Jeph Loeb’s New NOVA

Takes Flight in MARVEL NOW!,” Loeb explained to Albert Ching more about what his vision for Nova would be:

Sam Alexander and his story has been in the works for some time now. We knew what Abnett and Lanning's plans were to wrap up a massively wonderful storyline and that gave us a number of new opportunities. We wanted to respect Richard Rider's passing and still move forward with Nova. This is Sam's story. It's different from what we've seen before but hopefully fans and new readers will respond to him (Ching).

This vision included introducing Sam Alexander's Nova in the new cartoon: *Ultimate Spider-Man*, where he appeared for four seasons. Sam's adventures would bring him face to face with many established characters that frequented with Richard Rider's Nova the likes of Rocket Raccoon, Gamora and Spider-Man. The series lasted forty-two issues over two volumes where the tenth issue was the celebrated issue #100 which represented all Nova volumes combined. However, it was issue eleven of that second volume when something amazing happened: Richard Rider returned.

This is where I must side-step for a moment. An explanation is required to events that took place in the pages of *Guardians of the Galaxy* that directly relates to Richard Rider. In 2013, Marvel Comics writer Brian Michael Bendis took over writing *Guardians of the Galaxy*. One of the main characters was Star-Lord even though in the pages of *The Thanos Imperative*, he was left (supposedly) for dead in the Cancer-verse. Fans were left to wonder how Star-Lord (and Drax for that matter) returned and since they had, then where was Nova (Richard Rider)? That question was answered in issues eighteen through twenty of *GOTG*. The tale was told as a flashback story told by Peter Quill (Star-Lord) where he reveals the events that took place after

the doorway closed to the “Cancer-Verse.” He explained that there was a continued battle between Nova, Star-Lord and Drax against Thanos and the four of them versus the dark versions of the Avengers. The last minutes of the battle it was explained that Richard Rider was mortally wounded and in his final moments he used the combined might of the Nova Force and the Cosmic Cube to create a doorway in order to transport Star-Lord and Drax (and regrettably) Thanos back home at the cost of what seemed to be his own life. Fast-forward to issue eleven of Nova (Sam Alexander) and it’s revealed that Richard Rider has somehow survived. On December 7th, 2016, a new Nova series was released. This time it starred both versions of Nova: Richard Rider and Sam Alexander. While only lasting for seven issues, this series resolved everything that happened to Richard Rider following the events of *The Thanos Imperative* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* while creating a new status quo for the both Richard and Sam. At the time of this writing there isn’t a new Nova series...yet.

In the pages of *Rocket Boosters 2*, the second installment to the Nova fanzine, Chris Marrinan wrote an article titled “Nova Space” where he asserts that “The original Nova keeps coming back, in some form or other, and probably will survive many more ‘re-boots’ as he has an enduring quality that I think appeals to the kid in all of us, who can see him or herself in that hero’s shoes, yet with the power to fly, topple buildings, and defeat armies” (Marrinan 51). It’s worth noting that in 2014, Guardians of the Galaxy moved to the “big screen” and with it the introduction of the Nova Corps and it’s home planet: Xandar. Although GOTG presented us with a non-super-powered version that played more like a police force, that doesn’t leave out the possibility of a Nova feature-film. This was followed in 2015 by The Marvel Comics event *Secret Wars* which gave readers a look at a version of Nova from an alternate reality. The story

titled: “The Infinity Gauntlet” written by Gerry Duggan took place in a world where *Annihilation* ended differently. Here we have a girl, Anwen Bakian, who becomes a Nova following in the footsteps of her mother. This reality is a grittier world called New Xandar where they search for the Infinity Stones trying to keep them from Thanos. It lasted only five issues with its own definitive ending. Then in 2018 after the events of *Avengers: Infinity War* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Nicole Sobon reported in an article titled “Marvel Studios Chief Sees ‘Immediate Potential’ for Nova” for Comic Book Resources website that Kevin Feige (the current president of Marvel Studios) commented about the hero: “Nova is...if we have a big board with a bunch of characters that have more immediate potential, Nova is on that board” (Comic Book Resources). Since then, there has been a lot of “chatter” about the possibilities of a Nova movie. Until the day comes that we see the “Human Rocket” in 4K, Nova continues to make appearances in comic books. Most recently showing up in the pages of *Champions* for Sam and *Guardians of the Galaxy* for Richard with something dark and ominous on the horizon: *Annihilation: Scourge*, a new story being released in 2019 that brings about the return of Annihilus. Cosmic News’ Matt McGloin reported in an article titled “Nova Front And Center In ‘Annihilation: Scourge Alpha’” that “Marvel Comics has officially announced the new Annihilation event, with the “Scourge Alpha” prelude...where we see Richard Rider Nova is front and center in the variant cover (Cosmic Book News). What does the future hold for Nova? Only time can tell, but if Chris Marrinan is correct, fans should expect another self titled comic sooner rather than later.

For over forty years, Nova has captured the hearts and imaginations of both kids and adults alike through the various incarnations of this hero. Although there are many other alien’s

who have wielded the Nova Force, like many others hero's before him it's the human factor that always seems to extend the limits of what's possible. It's the nature of humanity to look into the stars and dream of more and it's why stories such as these have lasted through the ages; they tug at the strings of reader's imaginations. This is why Nova has remained relevant over the years.

The intertextuality of Nova in "My Secret Identity" when Andrew Clements opened the pages of What If # 15 is evidence that the character has transcended the comic book page and has become a thematic representation: that people dream of the moment adventure appears and takes them beyond the stars from the ordinary world past the threshold. That's why Nova has remained so dear to the fans. Each time we look onto Nova's adventures in their various sculptures, we become Nova as well.

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