

#MeToo allegations against 95-year-old Marvel comics legend Stan Lee backfire

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Last week, comic book writer and publisher Stan Lee became the latest target of the #MeToo witch-hunt sweeping Hollywood after allegations that he “repeatedly groped” and “harassed” nurses caring for him at his Los Angeles home. Lee is 95 years old.

He is the former head of Marvel comics, where he currently serves as chairman emeritus. He is the co-creator of superheroes the Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, Doctor Strange, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four. Inducted into the Comic Book Hall of Fame in 1994 and the Jack Kirby Hall of Fame in 1995, Lee received a National Medal of Arts in 2008.

Born in New York City in 1922, Lee was deeply influenced by his family’s experience during the Great Depression. Parents Celia and Jack Lieber, newly arrived Romanian Jewish immigrants, worked in the garment industry but were thrown out of work when the Depression hit, and life was a constant struggle. These difficulties, and his early voracious reading—Twain, Dickens, Verne, H.G. Wells, Poe and Shakespeare—informed the infectious warmth, inventiveness and sense of community that attracted generations of readers.

Marvel’s comics dealt with bigotry and drug use, the civil rights movement, prisoners’ rights, student protests and the Vietnam War, themes previously regarded as off-limits. Lee believed superheroes should be human, with the same foibles, flaws and problems as regular people. During the early 1970s, he challenged censorship by the United States Comics Code Authority, which was later forced to relax its heavy-handed control.

The accusations against Lee, based on a single anonymous source, were published by Britain’s *Daily Mail* on January 9. “He is said to have asked for oral sex in the shower, walked around naked and wanted to

be ‘pleasured’ in the bedroom,” the *Mail* reported.

It is not clear that any of these alleged activities are legally actionable. No police complaint has been made and no lawsuit filed, but last year the female owner of the nursing company, who had cared for Lee on occasion, threatened to go public with allegations against the Marvel creator, who is worth an estimated \$50 million. Lee’s lawyer Tom Lallas issued a cease-and-desist letter against the woman on December 20, in which he described claims that his client had sexually harassed nurses as “defamatory.”

In a subsequent statement sent to the *Daily Mail*, Lallas said the woman’s accusations against his client amounted to a crude shakedown operation: “Mr. Lee categorically denies these false and despicable allegations and he fully intends to fight to protect his stellar good name and impeccable character.

“We are not aware of anyone filing a civil action, or reporting these issues to the police, which for any genuine claim would be the more appropriate way for it to be handled. Instead, Mr. Lee has received demands to pay money and threats that if he does not do so, the accuser will go to the media. Mr Lee will not be extorted or blackmailed, and will pay no money to anyone because he has done absolutely nothing wrong.”

On January 11, the *Daily Mail* followed up with further allegations, this time from a Chicago masseuse who attended his hotel suite last April. She alleges that Lee “groped” her, demanding sex and then masturbating in her presence. Lee’s lawyers hit back, saying their client “categorically denies” the allegations, and pointing to further opportunistic efforts to extort cash.

While Lee is the latest victim of the #MeToo and #Time’sUp “moments,” the accusations against him

have quickly backfired, with his many fans voicing their disgust and anger over the trampling of fundamental democratic principles, including the presumption of innocence. In thousands of social media posts, tweets, memes, videos and discussion threads posted over the past week, one sees the democratic and humane sentiments of ordinary people asserting themselves.

“So let me get this straight,” wrote one Twitter user “#StanLee has no accusers through 94 years of his life, about 70 of those being an icon, and he finally becomes a sexual deviant at age 95? ... I’m sorry, but gimme a break.”

“These women accusing #StanLee tried to blackmail him first and never went to the police.” wrote another Twitter user, “I’m thinking this story is pure bullshit by women trying to take advantage of the current social climate for a quick buck.”

A graphic artist tweeted: “The Stan Lee accusations are where the #MeToo movement hits critical mass. There MUST be due process. We can’t blindly assume truth in every accusation. Where’s the burden of proof? Otherwise it’s anarchy.”

Care workers pointed to the fact that sexual disinhibition is common among elderly patients: “As someone who works with the geriatric community,” wrote Mini, “there are expected behavioural changes such as being sexually inappropriate that comes with dementia and other related illnesses and it is not controllable #StanLee #ProtecttheElderly.”

Another wrote: “This behaviour should absolutely come as no surprise to ANYONE in the health care community. His behaviour is predictable and should be expected at the advanced age of 95. The professionalism of the nurses making these allegations is what is lacking.”

Many objected to the inherent cruelty of the accusations against Lee, who lost his wife of 69 years to a sudden stroke just six months ago: “Here’s a question, if Stan Lee dies due to stress from these accusations without evidence, who is to blame?” asked one incensed fan.

Significantly, the accusations against Lee have not been pursued so far by major US news outlets. Senior editors and media proprietors perhaps sense that the McCarthyite rampage they instigated four months ago with the attack on Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and

many others is now on shakier ground.

Even if the accusations against Lee were true (and there is no evidence to suggest this is the case), the spectacle of a nursing company persecuting an elderly patient for sexually explicit “acting out” is obscene. Behaviour of the sort alleged, from a 95-year-old patient, should be met with care and understanding—and, heaven forbid, a little humour.

If sexual disinhibition by elderly patients were to be criminalised, then every nursing home and aged care facility worldwide would face a nightmarish *Handmaid’s Tale* scenario, with vulnerable patients denounced as deviants and ostracised by the new guardians of puritan morality. The company hired to look after Lee owed him a legal and professional duty of care, which it appears to have shamelessly breached.

Lee is now being cared for by a new nursing company, Vitale Nursing Inc. Its spokesperson Julie Wozniak said Lee is “polite, kind and respectful. It has been a privilege to care for him.”

Of course, those who have been happy to embrace the #MeToo juggernaut and repeat every accusation against a prominent celebrity, actor, director, etc., as good coin have been quick to denounce Lee, with one insisting he should be subject to trial by the media even if the accusations are untrue!

On Inverse.com, James Grebey writes: “Lee’s supporters claimed that the allegations either didn’t happen or were much ado about nothing because he’s 95 years old. I cannot believe I have to say this, but being old is not a ‘get out of sexual harassment allegations free’ card. This is bigger than Stan Lee, and it’s frankly bigger than the question of whether or not the allegations are true.”



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