

Something to Marvel At: Marvel changes the Punisher's logo after years of appropriation

On Monday, December 20, 2021, Marvel announced its new prestige comic book series featuring their infamous character Frank Castle, The Punisher. The title, releasing in March 2022, is described as “a series years in the making that will mark the definitive culmination of Frank Castle’s journey.” The new series will be written by Jason Aaron (*The Avengers*) and drawn by Jesús Saiz (*Ka-Zar*) and Paul Azaceta (*Amazing Spider-Man*).

The series is sure to include some big developments for the character, including a controversial change to his iconic skull logo. Many fans are outraged, as fans are prone to be, by this departure from tradition. But Marvel has an unusual reason for the skull alteration.

Introduced as an assassin hired to take out Spider-Man in the 1970s, The Punisher quickly evolved into Marvel’s quintessential antihero: a vigilante who deals out harsh justice by any means necessary. This brand of unrestricted aggression is a trademark of the character who is often placed on both sides (and sometimes directly in the middle) of the neverending battles between good and evil. The Punisher’s rash and sometimes cruel executions of justice have often received criticism within the Marvel Universe and in real life.

While not everyone may be familiar with The Punisher, they may recognize his iconic logo, a white skull with elongated teeth. In recent years, the symbol has been co-opted by police, people who serve in the military, and even far-right extremist groups. Though many claim to identify specifically with The Punisher’s unrelenting desire to carry out justice, it is hard to ignore the aggressive connotations of the symbol.

It raises the obvious question, why identify with such an inherently violent character? Why not with Spider-Man, or Captain America, or Superman, or frankly any character that is more virtuous in their pursuits? Some might reduce the answer to, “he’s a badass,” which I totally agree with, but so are Flash and Hawkeye. I could even see the argument for Punisher’s moral grayness, thus making him seem more relatable, but there are dozens of characters throughout pop-culture who display those same traits.

In recent years, we’ve seen Punisher’s iconic symbol constantly appropriated by individuals who favor aggressive and violent tactics. We’ve seen it utilized by massive numbers of police officers and throughout the military, as a subtle glorification of the violent aspects of their careers. More notably, it’s often used by far-right extremists such as The Proud Boys and other white nationalist groups. For these, it’s clear that they identify with Punisher’s use of brutal tactics to achieve their specific version of justice, but this runs quite contrary to the creator’s intention.

Punisher co-creator Gerry Conway is no fan of his character’s appropriation, stating in a 2019 interview, “It’s disturbing whenever I see authority figures embracing Punisher iconography because the Punisher represents a failure of the justice system...” In his ongoing efforts to combat those warping the intentions of the character he brought to life, Conway launched the Skulls For Justice campaign in 2020 hosted by apparel company Custom Ink. The campaign features t-shirts featuring the Punisher logo entwined with Black Lives Matter (BLM receives 100% of the proceeds).

“For too long, symbols associated with a character I co-created have been co-opted by forces of oppression and to intimidate black Americans,” Conway says on the Skulls for Justice merch site. “This character and symbol was never intended as a symbol of oppression. This is a symbol of a systematic failure of equal justice. It’s time to claim this symbol for the cause of equal justice and Black Lives Matter.”

Though Marvel hasn’t explicitly stated the reasoning behind the icon change, it could be representative of the company’s desire to distance the character from real-life violence. The meaning of any story is defined in part by audiences. Rebooting the icon is an effort to regain control of a character whose perception has evolved in unanticipated directions. Hopefully, this reboot can force new thinking into segments of our society that were seeing a different message in the classic icon.