

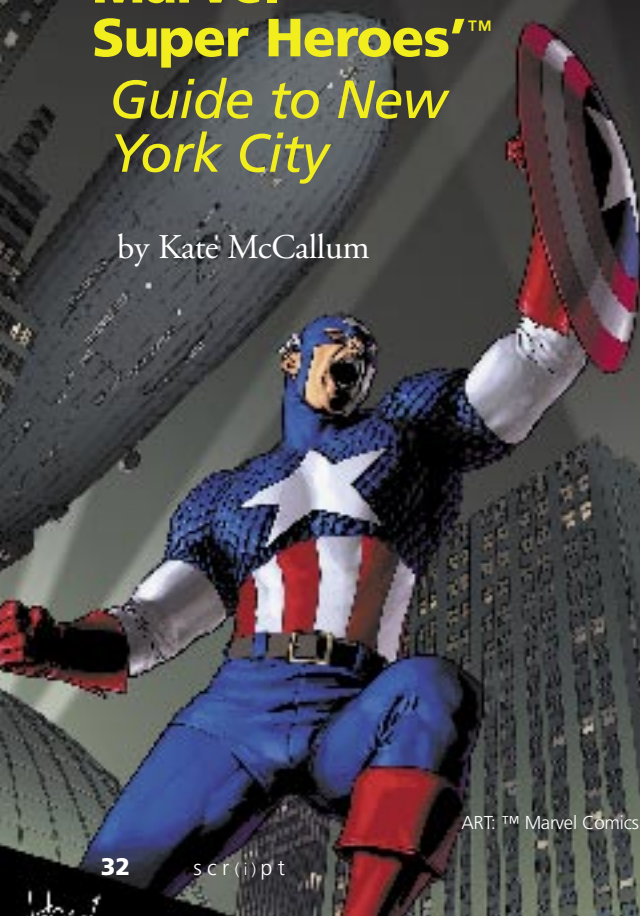
The Television Docu/ Reality Special

and the creation and
making of

TRAVEL CHANNEL'S

Marvel Super Heroes™ Guide to New York City

by Kate McCallum



ART:™ Marvel Comics

With six broadcast networks and over 30-plus cable outlets comprising the landscape of the small screen, and with new outlets launching at a rapid pace, countless hours of television programming are needed to fill schedules in the burgeoning niche world of broadcasting.

Common terms used in the entertainment industry for this ever-increasing genre of content are “reality,” “informational,” “documentary” programming or “unscripted” programming; but content creators and producers Karen Kraft and Molly Hermann would disagree. Writing is definitely a part of crafting documentary/informational content—to such a degree that even the WGA is working to implement a division for the writers of the so-called “nonfiction” genres.

Karen Kraft graduated with a B.S. in communications from Ithaca College and an M.A. in film and writing from American University. Kraft joined Discovery in 1995 as a producer/writer for Discovery Networks International. During her tenure Kraft was personally involved in pitching, producing and writing numerous award-winning productions. In 1999, she was promoted to creative executive of the Discovery Production Group International. In her role, Kraft oversaw the editing of dozens of long and short-form originals as executive producer/creative executive, as well as handled reversions for Discovery networks in over 155 countries. Over the last four years, her creative team, the Production Services Unit International, has garnered over 100 awards from such prestigious festivals as PROMAX, Monitor, Worldfest, CINE and the New York Festivals.

Her associate, co-producer and director of *Marvel Super Heroes™ Guide to New York City*, Molly Hermann, graduated from Dickinson College with a B.A. in American studies. She also attended American University, where she received an M.A. in film and television. Hermann joined Discovery in 2000 after having spent many years in field production for Discovery, PBS programming and working on live television, commercials and non-profit documentaries. In her nearly four years at Discovery, she has produced a series of award-winning shorts and several high-definition originals.

Marvel Super Heroes' Guide to New York City is a wonderfully entertaining special which airs on the Travel Channel and will be available on DVD through the Discovery stores and online site. It's a super-heroic blend of part Marvel comic book history and insight—and part travel destination show, uniquely stylized with graphics that reflect the art of the comics themselves. The show features interviews with such legends as Stan Lee, Joe Simon (co-creator of Captain America), Roy Thomas and Joe Quesada (former and current Marvel editors-in-chief) and the Spider-Man father and son artists John Romita Sr. and John Romita Jr. It also pays tribute to the great artist Joe Kubert who founded the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art, Inc. just outside New York City. I was fortunate to attend a promo screening and panel discussion at 2004 Comic-Con where I interviewed both Kraft and Hermann about how they pulled off this heroic stunt.

scr(i)pt: *So, whose great idea was this? I loved it and learned so much about the history of Marvel and comics.*

MOLLY HERMANN: Well, definitely not mine. I would never have come up with it. I'd be doing a show about the history of horses or something else.

KAREN KRAFT: The show is a concept that Rick Rodriguez, the general

manager of Travel Channel, and I came up with. Molly was a huge contributor from the beginning in designing the look of the show which, of course, influences how you write it.

scr(i)pt: *What was your inspiration?*

KK: Comics, mythology, *Star Trek*. I'm the typical child of the 80s who loved and grew up on all that fun stuff ... although I enjoy horses, too.

MH: Karen's a comic book nerd. But, in a really cool way and through this experience, she's turned me into a comic book nerd also! I now say things like "Oh, no! The Punisher's family was gunned down in Central Park, not hanged." Very frightening.

KK: I've always wanted to do documentaries on comic books. I have a love of the art form. I grew up on them and learned to read from comic books. I've read everything Stan Lee and Will Eisner created.

scr(i)pt: *So this piece gave you the opportunity to explore your passion?*

KK: Absolutely. Nothing is better than having your work be your hobby. But, it's also a huge job in trying to make something that's a 2-D medium into looking 3-D. I find using a documentary to present such rich history absolutely enthralling.

scr(i)pt: *Once you had this initial idea, what did you do to bring it to the next step?*

KK: The process was to team up with someone who could work through thick and thin and also to make sure that it wasn't just a documentary that would interest me as a comic insider but also the larger mainstream public. That's why I wanted Molly to work on it.

MH: Yes, my job is reining in Karen and bringing a different perspective.

KK: Right. 'Cause she would say, "Nobody really cares about that, Karen. But the love affair between, you know, Matt Murdock and Elektra, that's good. We can keep that."

MH: I liked the idea of the show because I like pop culture, and I love subcultures. We went to the San Diego Comic-Con last year to do research, and it's very apparent that there are many people who are very into this.

scr(i)pt: *Yes, it's amazing to see the scope of the "world" here. Everyone should experience Comic-Con at least once—especially if you work in entertainment.*

MH: It's really a subculture. The idea that people define their lives by developing an interest that then informs their social lives is very intriguing. The comic book phenomena is truly an American art form. It has a long history, and that's what interested me. But, I didn't come from the perspective where I was reading *Spider-Man* as a kid. I didn't have that kind of instant "wow!" That was actually good because I was able to monitor how much we needed to know and then also what didn't fall within our treatment idea.

scr(i)pt: *From the initial concept, were you skewing it towards the Travel Channel?*

KK: Oh, yes.

scr(i)pt: *I mean, seeing that you're inside the system, which is a little different than most of our readers who are on the outside of the system, can you explain the process?*

KK: Well, it was similar to being on the outside in that we still had to develop and pitch the idea. We were trying to take a project that we felt very passionate about, that we also felt was very interesting, and make it work for a network's needs. Tailor it is a better way to say it.

scr(i)pt: *Right. Thinking "inside the box" is what I call that.*

KK: Exactly. Then kind of push that box out as much as you can.

MH: Also, it ended up making the project more unique because ... there have been histories of comics done. Ours really wasn't a history. There is a history section, but it relates to New York and looking at the city in a new way. The Travel Channel angle was a challenge but a challenge that I think made a very unique show ... and something that no one's done before.

scr(i)pt: *Yes, and so you—looking from the inside out at your landscape of outlets—created this wonderful piece.*

KK: Rick and everybody who's involved in

comics deeply know that New York is the center of the comic universe, especially from its infancy. So, you figure, okay, how do we make these two concepts work? It's a destination show. For someone who doesn't really know anything about comics but understands the mainstream media success of *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, he or she could visit New York and say, "Oh, The Empire State Building. I had no idea that was related to these super heroes"—or visit Hell's Kitchen and know that Daredevil hangs out there, or that Greenwich Village is where Dr. Strange lives. Really, the story is about the creators and how New York influenced the comic book characters and the comic book settings throughout the last 60 years.

scr(i)pt: *Did you have to put together a treatment of your concept to pitch and present to the executives who greenlit it?*

MH: Yes, and for the treatment process one thing that we did was, basically, look through a million comic books and ...

KK: ... No hardship on me since I seem to own a million comic books.

MH: Karen would say, all excited, "Okay, here, here, look at this one." I'm saying, "What are you talking about? I'm asking you about something else, and you have already moved on ..." Without Karen, I would have gotten the show done; but I would have gotten to minute 22 and been out of material. Without me, Karen would have had a six-hour show.

KK: Molly edited me—we balanced perfectly. We also had another person who helped us write content too, the talented Mike Mills. He participated along the way when we needed to do rewrites of sections.

scr(i)pt: *How did you pitch the concept to your company?*

KK: Rick wanted a comic show on Travel, somehow, someway, so we knew we had to get creative to impress him and make it work. The show is basically divided by commercial breaks into five acts. Then we had to decide the themes for each act and what the throughlines for the whole show were. From there we sat down and said, "Okay, what do

we know about comics in New York City and the great destinations?”

scr(i)pt: *This was all ... before you got the approval?*

KK: That’s correct. This is developing our treatment.

MH: I would say that for our treatment we did a bullet-point list of destination places/great comic events under each act. In fact, in our first meeting, they said “This is great.”

scr(i)pt: *So you laid it out with what would occur in each act?*

KK: I would look through comics with Molly and our team and come up with ideas. Molly did a great job of structuring it and saying where she thought things should fall in, where she thought an idea would make best sense for a non-comic fan. We were kind of bouncing back and forth with each other. But we took that bullet-point treatment for each act and then fleshed it out. Each act had its own theme. Act One is Spider-Man and his NYC, and it includes places like Forrest Hills and the George Washington Bridge.

The second act is a “tour of Manhattan” where we circle the city clockwise and highlight important NYC icons that are meaningful to the comic world—like The Empire State Building or the UN. The third act is the history of comics in NYC beginning in the late 30s—we did a large golden age bullpen recreation of that. Great fun. Then, Act Four is September 11 where we featured the Romitas, a father-son team who both drew Spider-Man. This is significant because John Romita Jr. drew the famous “Black Issue” where Spider-Man arrives a moment too late at the Twin Towers. The fifth and final act is the business of comics in New York City—a destination list of where the great stores are, like Midtown Comics in Times Square. Each act is sort of a self-contained unit, and you have natural storylines that run through which are the interviews with the creators and our narrator sharing stories about key comic characters that are iconic.

scr(i)pt: *Did you have to get the Marvel stamp of approval?*

KK: The President of Marvel then, Bill Jemas, said yes, basically. Sony had to say yes on the part of Spider-Man, too.

MH: This show had a healthy budget, but it couldn’t have been made without relationships. That’s what makes it really unique due

to a lot of Karen’s connections.

KK: We had such a great team. Molly did the primary directing and deserves credit for all those great New York sceneries. She and Rob Lyall, the DP, were so collaborative; and the sound recordist, Greg Breazeale, was great. It’s nice when you have a team that has chemistry. When you see all the great stuff that they get on tape, it definitely influences the writing. Everybody strictly thinks that you write a first draft and you shoot it exactly like that. Perhaps that is largely true for fiction; but, in documentaries you do as much research and prep as you can. You come up with a basic idea, and next you talk to someone like Molly who can help conceptualize how it should be creatively laid out. Then, you start the bullet-point treatment, and you start doing phone interviews and decide how you’re going to lay it out. You see how that works with the budget and what kind of tools are needed to make sure that everything possible is available to the DPs and the folks in the field so that they can work as creatively as possible and help your vision come to life. Finally, you get the client to agree with it.

scr(i)pt: *Did you conceptualize the idea about the New York landscape comic book style ahead of the time or was that done in post?*

KK: You mean the graphics? Yes, absolutely. Even the interview backdrops we conceived in pre-production. Paul Falcon, a terrific art director in Silver Spring, Maryland, helped us conceptualize the background and the recreation of the bullpen scene.

scr(i)pt: *Did you use stock footage or did you shoot it all yourselves?*

MH: The main decision on stock footage that we made was that we bought the aerials. We could have shot it, but it would have been a lot more expensive. It would have cost \$8,000 a day in a helicopter, but we didn’t know about the weather and how much we’d really be able to get. Since it was New York, there was a lot of stock available. We also used a little bit of random New York stock footage, but most of it is footage we shot.

scr(i)pt: *Okay. So the writing process is very much about preplanning ...*

KK/MH: Right. Yes.

scr(i)pt: *In your field, in this genre, is there a writer-specific position?*

MH: There is.

KK: There’s a range really.

MH: Yeah, there are a couple different situations for writers. You can hire someone whose only job is writing. We sort of did the producer/writer route where, if you are lucky enough to have producers that can write, then that’s great. One of Mike Mills’ roles was to polish up what we were writing. It’s like another set of eyes because we were a little close to it at times.

KK: I get into a lot of detail about the characters, and Molly would say we’re getting too far down this path. If you write three or four sentences on paper, depending upon pacing, that could be 45 seconds or a minute of television. All of a sudden you feel like oh, I haven’t told you enough about The Fantastic Four to have a background. Molly and I could talk it out and ask if it is necessary for someone to have that much background to fully understand what you’re trying to convey. Rick Rodriguez had an eye for that—and ear—as did our EP, Howard Lee.

MH: I think it would have been really hard to have someone who was hired on specifically as just the writer. He would have eventually decided we weren’t paying him enough. This is such a collaborative and continual process. The tough part for me was structuring and figuring out how do you tell this story? What follows what? What do you have to know first? A couple of times we were saying where does that go? There was this great scene from the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art, Inc. It didn’t fit into the show in an obvious way because Joe isn’t really a Marvel artist, and it’s kind of a Marvel show. We had it for a while at the end of the show where you could see the next generation of artists. We felt that it was important to show a couple ways you could maybe break into the industry.

KK: I really like to show how you could maybe ...

scr(i)pt: *... Make your dreams come true?*

MH: Right. Exactly. There are all these great, young aspiring artists at this school, and that’s a way you could do it.

KK: Joe runs the school—the only one of its kind really, just outside of New York; and both his sons are famous comic book artists, Adam and Andy Kubert. Very nice, talented men. It’s a family affair.

scr(i)pt: *So what advice would you give to a writer who would want to break into this format in which you are working, and what skills, talents and qualities should they have?*

KK: If you've been writing news articles, if you've been writing film or television, everything comes down to how well you tell and structure your story—and, most importantly, think about it through a visual filter. You map out your story, do the production and then you take your interview scripts and go through them and pick out the best stuff. One of the choices we made was that we wanted to pick out the funny stuff. We wanted our show to be enjoyable, and we interviewed people who are really great, Stan Lee especially. He's so charismatic. So, that was sort of the tone of the show for which we were going. We wanted the people who lived and breathed New York and worked there to tell the New York story.

scr(i)pt: *And give them their voice.*

MH: A good example is ... Stan had this wonderful story he told about when he first started out in his teens working at Timely Comics, which was the name of Marvel early on. He was talking about his heroes—the creators of Captain America, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby; and we're listening to the story thinking about what can show to support this. We dreamed up this idea to do a big bullpen recreation shoot; and we then actually recruited practically everyone we worked with—even our boss, John Lowry, and Karen's husband, Rich, to be extras. For reference we used historical pictures from a book called *The Comic Book Makers* that Joe Simon and his son Jim wrote. We actually used a lot of pictures from that book. It's not exactly the same, but it looks like a memory. We wanted to give people a sense of what it would have been like.

KK: There're so many personalities in New York; and the city itself is such a huge personality, very eclectic and very exciting. The writer's challenge here is to remember that everything written has to be backed visually. When Molly and I go through the interviews, we try to find the compelling story, compelling angle and then be open to the idea that sometimes your baby has to change. It's important to work to come up with something new. There're a thousand shows on New York, but what makes this one visually interesting and different? If we turn off the sound, do you still want to watch it? The writer is composing something, a structure that is visual as well as just the written word. You have to keep those two mediums in mind. In our group discussions is where I think the writing really started to take shape and form.

scr(i)pt: *Does the show air on the Travel Channel specifically?*

KK: Yes.

scr(i)pt: *But then, will there be an after market for this?*

KK: It will be sold on DVD through the Discovery stores and through their web site. There's a chance it might be on another compilation.

scr(i)pt: *Anything else you'd like to add?*

KK: For us, the key was flexibility. You have to be flexible from the very beginning to the end. Then you're actually working for the clients who have the final say. So if they don't like something, you have to rewrite it. Your rewriting affects how the visuals play out, so

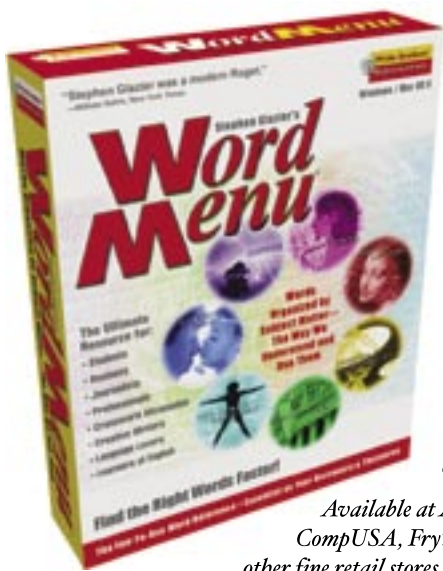
it ripples across the production chain. You also need a tremendous amount of patience because a lot of the time you're looking at the white page. You look at it and look at it, and it's still white. So, you just start writing words down and hope ... and do your best.

As the Master of the Universe—Stan Lee himself—said during the screening and panel discussion held at Comic-Con: "I've seen many documentaries on comics, but this one has its own unique style of storytelling and visuals; and you should all be very proud of it!"

Indeed! As for Kraft and Hermann's future endeavors ... after having spent nine years at Discovery, Kraft has become a recent partner at Secured Media Capital in Santa Monica, where she will join Jack Roberts and Nate Hicks in developing and producing independent films, television series and documentaries. Molly Hermann is producing more great originals in Discovery's Internal Production Group.

Check out Discovery.com for more information about the show. (i)

KATE McCALLUM is a Los Angeles-based independent writer/producer/consultant currently working in development with writer/producer Michael Chernuchin at Universal Studios. She has recently founded BRIDGE ARTS MEDIA and has an M.A. in consciousness studies. Kate is especially interested in the creative process, media, the arts and story and their effect on culture and society. Contact her at Bridgartsmedia.com



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