
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

What's your superpower?

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Neil...

Alice

And I'm Alice. So Neil, the subject of today's show is superheroes! Who's your favourite?

Neil

Spiderman. He's cool and funny – and he can spin webs and jump off skyscrapers!

Alice

Well, my favourite superhero is Ms Marvel.

Neil

I've never heard of her – and I'm a bit of an expert on comic book superheroes.

Alice

Well, a growing number of people from ethnic backgrounds are getting bored of all these white male superheroes they can't relate to. And they're hungry for characters a little **closer to home** – or relevant to their own lives.

Neil

So what's Ms Marvel's super power?

Alice

She's a **shape shifter** – which means she can change shape and become anything she wants. But she's also just Kamala Khan, an average teenager from New Jersey, who happens to be Asian and a Muslim.

Neil

It sounds good. But I think it must be time for today's quiz question, Alice!

Alice

OK, here it is. What is the name of the new character that replaces Tony Stark as Iron Man? Is it...

- a) Miles Morales?
- b) Riri Williams?
- Or c) Jane Foster?

Neil

I'm going to say a) Miles Morales because he sounds like a man.

Alice

Well, we'll find out later on the show whether you got the answer right or not. Now, I have another question. What are the rules for achieving superhero status? Superman is an alien, Ms Marvel has alien genes, and Spiderman and the Hulk are both **contaminated** – or poisoned – by radioactive substances that change their DNA.

Neil

What about Batman and Iron Man? They're just ordinary guys with a lot of money who use technology to create superpowers for themselves.

Alice

Good point. There don't seem to be any **hard-and-fast** – or clear – rules. But these special powers – whether it's being able to fly, or change shape, or spin webs – they allow the characters to do good in the world. And that's a big theme across all comic books.

Neil

That's true. But times have changed, and comic books these days often **blur** the line between right and wrong – making things unclear. Superheroes don't always do the right thing and struggle with everyday problems like you and me.

Alice

Let's hear more about imperfect superheroes from Jason Ditmer, professor of political geography at University College London.

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Jason Ditmer, professor of political geography at University College London

They [Marvel Comics] imbued these characters with real human problems. So Peter Parker had just, was sort of... one problem after another. The Fantastic Four was a family and they bickered and fought and Reed and Sue were a couple, and then they got married, and that had, like, never happened in superhero comics. So these people had lives that others could relate to.

Neil

So publishers – like Marvel Comics – **imbued** – or filled – their characters with human problems. I can't imagine a character like Captain America worrying about small things – or bickering with his wife!

Alice

And **bickering** means arguing about things that aren't important. Well, like you said earlier, times change, Neil. These days, the publishing houses want to attract a more **diverse** – or varied – readership: teenagers, women, ethnic minorities – who want superheroes they can relate to, facing issues from racial discrimination to bickering at home.

Neil

I know that women are indeed interested in superheroes because they've been appearing in movies and on TV, but the world of comic books has always been a bit of a guy thing.

Alice

Well, it isn't. Women read them and in some places women work in them. In Japan for example, we have the **manga** – these are Japanese comic books for adults and children. And, guess what – there is a strong tradition of female illustrators there.

Neil

Really?

Alice

Yes. Let's move on now and listen to Dr Casey Brienza, Sociologist at City University in London, talking about manga.

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Dr Casey Brienza, Sociologist at City University in London

One of the really interesting things about producing comics in Japan is that it's one of the few, kind of, autonomous careers that women can have. And so Japan has many, many female comic-book artists who write both for men, women, boys, and girls. And in the United States and in Britain female comic-book artists are far and away a minority.

Neil

Dr Casey Brienza there. So she says female comic-book artists are common in Japan but are a minority in the US and the UK.

Alice

It's particularly interesting that being an artist is an **autonomous** career – meaning you have the freedom to make your own decisions - and apparently this is not common for women in Japan.

Neil

And do you know who draws Ms Marvel? Is it a woman?

Alice

No. Ms Marvel is drawn by a man – the Canadian comic book artist Adrian Alphona. But we are running out of time so let's go to today's quiz question. I asked you: what's the name of the new character that replaces Tony Stark as Iron Man? Is it...

- a) Miles Morales?
- b) Riri Williams?
- Or c) Jane Foster?

Neil

And I said Miles Morales.

Alice

And you were... wrong, Neil. I'm sorry. The answer is Riri Williams. Marvel Comics has recently diversified its characters to look more like the world we know today, including the addition of female African-American college student Riri Williams as Iron Man. Marvel has also given Thor's hammer to a woman, introduced a black, Hispanic Spider-Man called Miles Morales and created Kamala Khan, a Muslim superhero otherwise known as Ms Marvel.

Neil

Very interesting. Now, let's remind ourselves of the words we learned today:
closer to home
shape shifter
contaminated
hard and fast
blur
imbued
bicker
diverse
manga
autonomous

Alice

And that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Don't forget to join us again soon!



Both
Bye!

Vocabulary

closer to home

relevant to their own lives

shape shifter

somebody who can change shape and become anything they want

contaminated

poisoned

hard and fast

clear

blur

make something unclear

imbued

filled

bicker

argue about something unimportant

diverse

varied

manga

Japanese comic books for adults and children

autonomous

having the freedom to make your own decisions