

Tales That Astonished



With one magic word, SHAZAM! The original Captain Marvel returned. Yes! the original Cap – not that Kree warrior over at the House of Ideas that had usurped the name, nor even Captain ‘Split!’ Marvel from MF Comics. No, this was the one and only World’s Mightiest Mortal – back after an absence of 20 years. So who was he? And where had he been? And why was it so surprising that the first issue showed Superman introducing him?

Captain Marvel was one of the earliest super-heroes to appear in the golden age of comics. In fact Cap appeared only a year after the first Superman in Action Comics #1. He first appeared in Whiz Comics #2 – Gangway for Captain Marvel! A very rare comic, though, not as half as rare as #1. So rare, there’s no copies! In fact, there never was a Whiz Comics #1 – so don’t part with that £50, 000 or so if you’re offered it!

Cap’s first appearance came in Flash Comics #1 – except that it was only an ashcan (a ‘trial’ comic made for copyright purposes) – and featured Captain Thunder. He only became Marvel after yet another ashcan – Thrill Comics#1. A little known fact was that he was actually called Captain as he was originally supposed to be the leader of a team of super-heroes. However, it was decided a team of heroes would never work in comics!

Created by Bill Parker, an editor for publishers Fawcett comics and drawn by C.C. Beck, Cap soon became the most popular hero of all-time. That means more popular than Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and any other masked man you can think of.



Cap was everywhere. He followed the US troops to war. He became one of the first heroes to be licensed to international publishers (such as Miller in the UK). He had his own Republic serial – and it’s still generally reckoned to be one of the best superhero TV shows ever made! Cap Junior, Mary and Uncle Marvel followed, as did the 3 Lieutenant Marvels. Let’s not talk about Hoppy the Marvel Bunny!

The return of SHAZAM!

So, what happened? Well, National Periodicals, publishers of Superman, decided the Big Red Cheese (as arch enemy Dr Sivana named him) was just too similar to the Big Blue Boy Scout and sued over breach of copyright. That resulted in Fawcett taking Cap off the shelves.

Not that Fawcett lost their case – well, not at the beginning. Every time National lost a case in a lower court, on they would go to a higher court. Only at the end of the publisher’s life did they agree to remove the Marvel titles – primarily because it was more hassle than sales would recoup.



But then, in 1973, Captain Marvel was back! This time, by new publishers DC – or National Periodicals, as they had been known! Only they couldn’t use the title Captain Marvel as Marvel already had the aforementioned Kree warrior in that comic.

This was the biggest news of the decade! Dealers ordered them in there thousands and fans...well, fans complained. They couldn’t get them! This was really the beginnings of speculation as regards comic books. They were kept for years in cellars and attics of dealers – waiting for the day to make them rich. They never did.

The title flopped! Despite bringing C.C. Beck back for the art, it just wasn’t what the kids wanted. It was TOO golden age. Childish stuff. None of the angst that Marvel Comics had developed.



But, hey, it did get better towards the end. Not soon enough to save it though. Cap continued appearing in the American media through TV shows and cartoons, as well as back-up strips in World’s Finest and occasional (and damned good) appearances in DC Comics Presents.

After the massive retcon that was Crisis on Infinite Earths, Cap came back as a darker version that explored his alter-ego (Billy Batson)’s kid-in-a-man’s-body association. For a while, he was in the Justice Society of America (along with my fave Black Adam), until a well-handled conflict with the Golden Age Flash put a stop to that. And now, Cap is a lost figure from a golden age – please, can’t somebody save him?

