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## Review of Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia, by Brian Cremins

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Captain Marvel fascinates and inspires study for a variety of reasons, but one in particular has been the radical change in his popularity over the decades. In his heyday, his comics outsold Superman's, and his magical incantation "Shazam!" entered into the English lexicon. And yet, over the years, the character's popularity diminished to the point where more people knew the name "Shazam" from *Gomer Pyle* re-runs than from the comics that introduced the word. So in his recent book *Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia*, Brian Cremins' focus on not only Captain Marvel but specifically how nostalgia is tied to the character makes for a particularly interesting study.

Cremins limits his focus primarily to the comic stories by Captain Marvel's primary creators from the Golden Age: C.C. Beck and Otto Binder. This of course makes the subject more manageable by avoiding later comic interpretations of the character, as well as those in other media, but much of the fondness many readers have for the the Marvel Family stems directly from what Beck and Binder laid out in those early stories. Further, Beck was fairly prolific in writing about his thoughts and experiences working on Captain Marvel, and Cremins frequently uses those pieces to expand upon or further highlight ideas seen in the comics themselves.

Rather than trying to encapsulate the full breadth of Captain Marvel stories, Cremins pulls out only a handful of individual comic stories to highlight and use as examples. By using just a few prime pieces, he's able to more deeply illustrate the points he's making, reinforcing them further with quotes from Beck (most frequently), Binder, and a host of others that were either associated with the comic itself or were part of Beck's "Critical Circle."

Cremins starts with a chapter each on Beck and Binder, applying Beck's thoughts on visual storytelling back to Captain Marvel's origin story and Binder's struggles as a freelance writer as they're explored through Mr. Tawny. The next two chapters address the complexities of telling simple, charming stories against the backdrop of the ugly realities of the times, in particular, how an upstanding, all-powerful hero like Captain Marvel fits in with the grim challenges of World War II and Adolf Hitler; and how depictions of race through the rarely mentioned character of Steamboat in a time before the Civil Rights movement. Cremins closes the book by bringing us forward beyond the years of Captain Marvel's original publication run, and how and why the character became something of a staple in fanzine circles as fans began waxing nostalgic for him in the 1960s and '70s.

Despite being written with an academic mindset, Cremins writes approachably. While not casual, his writing's easy style makes the book smooth and enjoyable. He walks through each story example slowly, occasionally stepping out for some germane anecdotes before circling back. While there is some danger in wandering too far afield during these instances, Cremins never seems to stray overmuch and brings readers back into the story before they've lost sight of his primary point.

The book includes a number of reproductions from the comics to emphasize Cremins' writing. These are most welcome, of course, but almost unnecessary in many cases, as the text itself describes the pages and panels in question. Readers who are either unfamiliar with the Captain Marvel stable of characters, or ignorant of illustration and storytelling terms, should have no difficulty following along, thanks to the specific panels chosen to accompany the text. And though Cremins provides something of a caveat up front about obtaining images from deteriorating, decades-old comics, the scans all come across very well despite being black and white reproductions of color comics.

Many books of this type examine the heroes from the perspective of a fan. While Cremins does cite himself as one, he's here able mostly to remove himself from that viewpoint and not only present his subject fairly objectively, but also address the very nature of the fandom the character has inspired. Cremins doesn't hesitate to bring up flaws in the concept or the creators themselves, but accepts them as part of the whole, while also pointing out where improvements can be/were made.

Captain Marvel has, in many iterations, seemed somewhat out of place relative to other contemporary comic characters. While he does not hold the popular attention of youth as he did back in the 1940s, by addressing the character, his creators, and the sense of nostalgia he seems to invoke, Cremins makes some solid arguments why that pull remains strong in the 21st century.