

Contemporary Collectibles: Mary Marvel, superteen

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Comic book superheroine Mary Marvel was one of the few of her gender to break the glass ceiling of her day, and did it before she was out of her teens. This happened in 1942, a propitious moment, at the onset of America's entrance into World War II, when women were being empowered, taking on factory jobs and playing professional sports - becoming wonder women in real life.

And Mary Marvel was among the first female spin-offs of a major male superhero, predating Superman's cousin Supergirl by more than a decade.

Mary, the long-separated twin of Captain Marvel, was first introduced in the comic book "Captain Marvel Adventure #18." It was written by Otto Binder - who would work on both Supergirl and Miss America - and drawn by Fawcett regular artist Marc Swayze, who has stated that her look and personality were inspired by the young Judy Garland. (The drawing was later taken over by Jack Binder, brother of Otto.)

This was only two years after the initial appearance of Captain Marvel (aka Billy Batson) in Fawcett's "Whiz Comics #2," and a few months after the debut of Captain Marvel Jr. (Marvel Bunny, an attempt by the company to enter the funny-animal market, also emerged in 1942.)

The teenage Mary Batson (who had been adopted to become the wealthy Mary Bromfield) learned of her sibling relationship with Billy via half of a locket, the mate of which was owned by Billy. The story evolved that they were separated soon after birth, following the death of their parents. After rescuing her from kidnappers, Batson reveals to her his Captain Marvel identity and his magical word: Shazam! When Mary repeats it, an enchanted lightning bolt strikes her and she is instantly transformed into a supergirl, rechristened Mary Marvel by her brother.

Through the intervention of the bearded old wizard Shazam, Mary gains the powers of the ancient goddesses whose names form an acronym of his - the grace of the moon goddess Selena, the strength of Amazon queen Hippolyta, the beauty of dawn goddess Aurora, the speed of Zephyrus (actually the male west wind god), the skills of Ariadne and the wisdom of Minerva - as well as the ability to fly. (It's interesting to note that while Billy transforms into a manly superhero, Mary remains a super-teen.) Her original costume consisted of an abbreviated, gold-trimmed, red skirt, a short-sleeved red blouse emblazoned with the iconic thunderbolt symbol, a cape and yellow boots.

Mary Marvel took over as the lead character in Wow Comics in January 1943, then was awarded a magazine of her own from December 1945 through 1948, as well as being a regular in Marvel Family Adventures. In her Mary Marvel comics, she acquired a few supporting players - sympathetic Uncle Marcel (who was actually neither her uncle nor a Marvel) and his niece, Freckles Marvel, as well as such villains as mad scientist Georgia Sivanna, Mr. Night and Nightowl. The character caught on with teenage girls, who formed a fan club

called the Mary Marvel Marching Society, and there was also a line of Mary Marvel dresses in stores.

When DC Comics, which bought the rights to the Marvel troupe in 1973, revived her twin in its Shazam! series, Mary made some featured appearances. And the superpowers of Mary Batson Bromfield Marvel have continued to endure. She appeared in the 1981 Saturday morning TV cartoon "Shazam!," then was reintroduced in a 1994 graphic novel, "The Power of Shazam" by Jerry Ordway, initiating an ongoing series. At one point she became referred to as "the lady Captain Marvel" rather than Mary. She still persists as a guest star in Superman and Supergirl comics, and in 2003 was featured on the "Formerly Known as the Justice League" miniseries.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

Â© Copley News Service

Contemporary Collectibles: Mary Marvel, superteen by Linda_Rosenkrantz