

*File*  
*under Richard*  
*Gustor*  
*interview*

R: Can we kick off by talking about the new British Marvel weekly, CAPTAIN BRITAIN and how it came about?

SL: Well, as you know, all the other things we had in the British weeklies have been reprints from America and it occurred to me that we ought to have something done just for the British audience. Now, unfortunately, we don't have a British writer or a British artist over there, so we compromised by taking Chris Claremont, who has lived in England (this interview was conducted before Chris was taken off the strip), as the writer - I believe one of his parents is English...this is the closest we could get! And Herb Trimpe, who had just returned from a long stay in England, to handle the art. So we felt that with Chris and Herb it would visually look right and the script would have the correct flavour. Also we have Neil Tennant and Ray Wergen in our London office keeping an eye on it. Forgetting the English part of it, we also wanted a hero that the British public could identify with. I know that the name might sound a little corny but I felt that it was right on target. There's no mistaking what it is if the fellow ~~is~~ was called - CAPTAIN BRITAIN! Captain America, which has been a very successful character in America for many years - if you think about it, that's also rather a corny name - but he's always been popular here, and I'm hoping that the same will be true of Captain Britain. I also wanted to show that Marvel thinks enough of the English audience - that it's not a case of us just sending the strips over after we've published them here, but we really wanted to come up with something special...something that you'll be receiving and reading before we ever see it. You see it has not ~~quite~~ yet been shown in America and won't be for some ~~time~~ while.

R: Do you plan to fit Captain Britain in with the mainstream Marvel superheroes eventually?

SL: We'll just probably reverse what we've done so far. After it's been, hopefully, a success in England, then we'll reprint it here in America.

R: Has as much attention been paid to the creation of Captain Britain as would be paid to the creation of a new character for Marvel's American editions?

SL: I think so. I never paid much attention, as you might be able to tell, to the characters that I created. I took the easiest route.

R: But you laid the foundations on which others built. (end of side)

SL: .....be somewhere where the bomb exploded, and the rays of the bomb hit him, bingo. With Daredevil some radioactive material fell off a truck and got in his eyes. Spider-Man was bitten by a radioactive spider. These

were not very intricately thought out things, they were usually the first thing that came into my mind. Usually the other people, who have written the subsequent stories here at Marvel, like Roy Thomas, Marv Wolfman, Gerry Conway, and so forth, when they create characters they usually put a lot more care into them. However, with Captain Britain, there were a lot of conferences and discussions, mostly among Chris, Herb and Larry Leiber, our British comics editor. I didn't butt in too much as far as the story or art were concerned. The only thing I said was, I want a character who will be British, who will be relevant, who will have all of the attributes which we feel make a character popular. I want him to have some form of super-strength or super-power. I want him to have a secret identity - because I love secret identities - and it was to be something, again, that will appear in Britain and then will be reprinted in America. Now beyond that I left them to their own devices.

R: I'd like to go back to something you said earlier about using American creative staff on CAPTAIN BRITAIN. A number of people I spoke to in the U.K. said they would have preferred to see it done by some of our own writers and artists. Would you have any thoughts on perhaps bringing in British people once the comic was underway?

SL: All right, I'll tell you what I'll do.....

Incidentally, this is an absolutely beautiful newszine. It is one of the best-looking ones I have ever seen - and you can quote me on that! I think it's a handsome one. This is printed beautifully, it's laid out well, it's interesting reading. I love the masthead. I think it's a good one!

I would very seriously consider, if this strip does as well as I expect it to do, producing another strip for the British market with an English writer and artist, having it produced over there - if I could find the proper writer and artist. I would consider, if this strip does as well as I hope, instead of just the 8 pages per week, we may want to make it 16 or 20 pages per week, or put him in two books. Herb and Chris may not have time to do this so I would consider having another writer and artist helping out and doing additional work over there.

((So what I would suggest you do: Any writer and/or artist who feel they can do this type of work, have them send Larry Leiber samples of their work.))  
I must admit that it is much easier to an artist than a writer. The reason being; you can look at artwork and in a matter of 30 seconds you know whether this fellow can do it or not. It is the most difficult thing in the world to evaluate a writer. Now, forgetting the tremendous problems of dealing with a British writer you don't know, we even have a difficult time in America. I get calls and letters all the time from writers all over America and right here in New York. "My name is so-and-so, and I've just graduated college, and I've studied journalism and contemporary American literature. I'd like to write comics for you. Here are a couple of pages I've written." You can't really tell by reading a couple of pages. You can't even tell by



reading an entire script. It might be a story the fellow spent months working on, refining it, honing it and making it perfect. Whereas, once somebody writes for us he's got to grind those pages out, page after page, day after day. Therefore, with writers, somebody really has to be a professional comic book writer who has written for other companies and we know his work, or somebody who has come to Marvel and has got a job here as an assistant editor - or something of the sort - and we get to know the person. Little by little, we'll give him stories and see how he goes. That's the way I started. But just to hire a writer cold that we don't know, it is terribly difficult. ((Now if there were a writer in Britain who has done adventure strips like this, would like to write for us, and can send us many of the strips he has written, we can see if he can work in our style.))

R: Are you happy with the way the British weeklies are going or do you think they could still do better?

SL: I always feel things could do better. My problem is, I wish - desperately - that I could spend six months of the year in Britain and really work on them. I wish we had more original material in those comics. I even wish it were possible to print them in full colour. This is what bothers me. If we could charge 15p maybe we could afford to print them in colour. Now, I'm not sure, maybe we'd have to charge 18p or 20p, I haven't figured it out. But I don't have the nerve. How can we put out a comic for that price in Britain?

R: There are higher priced comics on sale in Britain, so I don't see why a Marvel one shouldn't succeed, especially with the benefit of the Marvel resources behind it.

SL: Do you think it would be worth a try?

R: I think it would. I think it would give you a much better scope to present the stories in. But, for the present, I think CAPTAIN BRITAIN is a good experiment - a compromise if you like.

SL: See, the funny thing is, I don't consider Britain and America that different. I know there is a difference. My own feeling for the British people, who I cannot tell you of the affection I have for them - I'm probably the world's biggest Anglophile. I'd have given anything to be British. My wife is English and I never feel as much at home as when I'm in England. So I never feel there's that much difference. In other words, to me an American comic and a British comic...we're like cousins, it's all in the family. The only thing about the British comics for the most part is that their style is different to Marvel. We at Marvel don't produce the 'American style', we produce the 'Marvel style'. We just try for something the other companies

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don't do the way we do. I know that the kids like it. When I say 'kids', I mean from 8 to 24! They like our style. It sells well in Italy, for example, it sells well in France. I don't think that national borders have much to do with it. Everybody seems to like adventure mingled with fantasy, mingled with high drama, mingled with exaggeration and a lot of action. I think the thing I'm unhappy about with our English weeklies is that I don't feel our material is being seen to the best advantage. The stories were written to be read complete, the entire story to be read in one sitting, not to be cut off at a point and continued next week. They were also illustrated to be seen in colour. So we've lost the colour and don't have complete stories - that bothers me.

As I say, I'm very happy that we've done as well as we've done. The problem is, I guess, I am, and I think to think most of us at Marvel are, perfectionists, and I don't like anything to be less than perfect if it's possible. I feel that if the British public like what we're doing now, imagine how they'd love it if only we could do it the right way! Even with CAPTAIN BRITAIN it's very frustrating. We wrote them as 8-page stories because we knew we could have 8 pages of colour in the front and 8 pages in the back - there was no way we could do 16 pages of new material per week. What I didn't realise was that one of those 8 pages was the cover! So that only leaves us with 7 pages of colour inside and we have an 8-page story! So for the first few issues we've had to put a little note in saying, "We've left the last page in black and white so that you can colour it yourself"! We don't like doing that, but we were trapped because of the purely physical and mechanical set-up of the printing plant. That's really frustrating. In future issues the stories will be 7 pages long so that every page can be in colour.

R: I'd like to move onto Marvel Comics generally now and ask you if you feel that much of the success of the company could be due to the fact that you have stamped your personality onto Marvel. Readers, when they think of Marvel, have a definite face and personality to recognise it by. You've established this by your constant publicity and lecture tours which, as yet, no other comics publisher undertakes.

SL: It would be very hard for me to say that our success could be based on this. Well, and he would love to hear this I'm sure, I'm really trying to make myself the Jim Warren of the comic book industry!! Seriously though, I do all this because I love Marvel Comics. In the beginning I wasn't just pushing Marvel. In the beginning I thought it was terrible that people didn't respect comics enough, and I would go on radio and TV, talk at colleges, etc., just trying to explain that comics in general are really an art form. They're as deserving of critical attention as the movies, television, theatre, etc.

R: This is the trouble with Britain. It is probably the only country in Europe that still considers comics as a medium for juveniles only. Anybody reading comics after about age 14 is an object of ridicule. I believe this



to be a hang over from Victorian times when one was considered illiterate if one read picture stories.

SL: The thing that I always used to, and still say is if Michaelangelo and Shakespeare were alive today and met in a pub, and if they got friendly and said, "Hey, why don't we collaborate?! I'll write ~~xxx~~ a script and you can draw it Mike. Okay Willy." And they did a comic strip. Would anybody have the temerity to say that the result of this collaboration wouldn't be the greatest work of art and literature ever seen?

R: And presumably Marvel would publish it.

SL: Absolutely right! What I'm getting at is that there is nothing wrong with the comic strip format. It's just that for so many years they were done just for very little children, adults never read them, and too often the writers themselves didn't have much respect for their audience and they would do any old thing. Now we at Marvel try to write good stories. We try to get the best illustrators we can, and so forth. Here in this country comics have been discovered by older people, by college students. I can't tell you how many schools I lecture at.

R: Back in the sixties Marvel Comics and colleges were very synonymous. Is it still as big as that today?

SL: Bigger than ever. Each year I lecture at more schools than the last. I just received a call yesterday from a lecture agency. I have three in a row coming up. I have to go to Buffalo, New York, the University of Albuquerque in New Mexico, the University of Vera Cruz in California, and I was asked if I could do all three. I've just got back from two others last week, I just can't remember them all. This was not the case 10 or 15 years ago, it's been growing all the time.

R: Are you trying to broaden Marvel's publishing activities into other fields outside comics, e.g. books?

SL: Always. I'm hoping to do a SILVER SURFER book, perhaps 200 pages of original story. It'll be an expensive coffee table book. This one I'll be writing myself with Jack Kirby drawing it. I hope it will be an absolute classic. We have the Origins books, a new one every year. We've got a new one coming out this October and I've just signed to do a fourth book. We did our "Marvel Fun Book" just recently. I'm doing an "Encyclopedia of Marvel Comics". We have an art book coming out shortly. I hope we'll be getting some TV series. Whatever direction there is to move in, I'd like to move there. I'm hoping to do some expensive comic books too, on slick paper with offset printing.

R: Like the French albums?

SL: Yes exactly. So we're always looking to see what we can do. The problem is, really, time. We're so busy just with the day-to-day operation of turning out 40 comic books a month. But yes, we're always looking for ways to branch out. I don't know whether I told you, but we're getting the rights to do Tarzan and John Carter of Mars. I'm hoping to be able to show the world how Tarzan should really be written and drawn.

R: Will you be doing just adaptations of the Burroughs material?

SL: And also some original stories. I'm going to have Roy Thomas write them, John Buscema illustrate them, and I think they are going to be absolutely beautiful.

R: What about Korak?

SL: We may get into that later but right now we are concentrating on Tarzan and John Carter of Mars.

R: I think I'd be making ~~xx~~ a serious omission if I didn't mention HOWARD THE DUCK.

SL: Howard the Duck has become so famous and so popular.

R: Agreed. The same is true in Britain. Using him as an example of a Marvel supporting character that has achieved star status (others include Black Panther, Inhumans, Silver Surfer, etc.), can I ask you if you can spot the potential in these characters when they first appear or does reader reaction to them surprise you?

SL: No, not at all. Usually we ourselves are the ones who say, "Hey, this character is great! Let's put him in his own book." And then our opinion is usually reinforced by the fan mail we get. Now, with Howard the Duck, I hadn't noticed him myself that much. I noticed him when he came out and I said to Steve Gerber, what the hell is this? He said, "I thought it would be fun to have a little duck coming from another planet where they all look like cartoon animals." I thought Steve was crazy, but I let him go ahead. Then I started looking at the fan mail and people would ask me about Howard, and I suddenly said, gee whiz, I think everybody likes him! So I said that just for fun I'd like to do a whole book of Howard the Duck. The everybody thought that I was crazy! I said, let's try it. We did and it's become very popular. But normally I can tell pretty quickly. When Jack Kirby threw the Silver Surfer into THE FANTASTIC FOUR, the minute I had seen the character, written his dialogue, and got used to working with him, I said that this would absolutely make a good book by himself. With most characters you can tell.



## ((Discussion of Marvel con))

R: How do you view fandom? Bearing in mind that it is not large enough to support comics but is actively involved in promoting and preserving the comics medium.

SL: How did my 'Big-mouthed published friend' view fandom?

R: He thought that fandom expressed too many ill-informed opinions but, by and large, was a good thing.

SL: I view fandom in a very positive way. I am crazy about the fans and I think the whole comic book industry owes the fans a very great debt of gratitude. I think that they have helped comics reach the point that they are at now. I think that these conventions they hold, these meetings they have, these fanzines that are published, in their own way are giving comic books a stature and are contributing to an enthusiasm for comics. I think that the publishers and the fans working hand-in-hand are really making comic books bigger every year. I have a personal debt to the fans because I have learned so much by them, because I read as many fanzines as I can.

R: You do?

SL: Oh yes, I read every one I can get my hands on. I read as much fan mail as I possibly can. You see these glasses I'm wearing? I used to have eyes like a hawk! I absolutely ruined my eyesight by reading hundreds and hundreds of letters a day from young kids, written with crayon and pencil where they didn't bother pressing down with the pencil so you could hardly see it, to typewritten pages. Anything that comes in from a fan I read if I can. That's one of the reasons I think the Marvel books are better than the competition because our idiot competitors never bothered to read the fan mail.

R: Just looking at the Marvel Bullpen today, it is made up almost entirely of former members of comics fandom.

SL: Well look, let's face it, you can't be good at something unless you care about it. The best actors in the world are the ones who live, eat, breathe the theatre. Not the casual person who says, "Oh, I think there's good money in acting, I'll become an actor." But people who, if they didn't get paid, would still have to act. The best artists in the world are the ones who would rather paint, draw or sculpt than breathe. Now the same thing, the best people in comics are the ones that care about comics. Of course the best artists and writers had to start out as fans. They had to start out by loving comics so that when they became artists and learned to draw, they wanted to draw comic strips. It's only natural. I wouldn't hire anybody who didn't care about comics no matter how good he or she was. It doesn't

matter to me. If I were a shoemaker I would have to be intensely interested in shoes. I don't think you can do anything well unless you care about it. So, as I say, you're darn right when you go to the Bullpen you're going to see people who care about comics. I had lunch with your editor, Archie Goodwin, the other day. At the next table in the restaurant were two of our other people, Roger Slifer and Chris Claremont. Now this was their lunch hour, they were out of the office. Archie and I couldn't help but hear what they were saying as they were sitting so close to us. For a full hour they did nothing but talk about comics, about the business. Who was writing what, who was drawing what, and how they were writing it and how they were drawing it, what they thought of this and that strip. And I remembered thinking how wonderful it is, here they were on their lunch hour and they might have been in the office. It was on their mind - they cared. And that's the way it is here at Marvel. And that's why I love the fans, they care. Because there isn't much difference between the fans and ourselves, we all have a mutual interest - and that is the comics.

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