Mark Gruenwald
and the Star Spangled
Symbolism of Captain America,
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Preface

Mark Gruenwald's run as writer of Marvel Comics' *Captain America* during the 1980s and 1990s is unquestionably epic. That distinction of "epic" can refer to content, though, admittedly, the long-term cultural impact of Gruenwald's stories from this era is smaller than those taking place concurrently on other comics, including some Marvel titles such as *Uncanny X-Men*. No, this use of "epic" comes from length—his 137-issue run, spanning a full decade—is a monumental amount of stability for a comic and character that had simply never enjoyed such a thing before. Other comics and characters certainly had experienced this type of longevity from a single writer—Chris Claremont wrote *Uncanny X-Men* from 1975 to 1991—but not Cap. Gruenwald himself acknowledges this in a 1988 interview with Joe Field when he explains that his three years on the comic at the time matched the longest term for a writer in the history of Captain America's solo title. Gruenwald theorizes in this interview that this lack of continuity led the character to have "ups and downs" because of "constantly having change in handling by different writers" ("Mark Gruenwald Interviewed by Joe Field").

Gruenwald, unlike some writers who would start on a pre-established title, is unwilling to disregard the history—as sporadic in quality and consistency as it was—of the character and instead forges ahead with the template and framework that was established, including that which was started immediately prior by previous writer Michael Carlin. In fact, Gruenwald's first issue (#307) deals with the immediate aftermath of Carlin's prior story by placing Cap (and I will refer to the character in this familiar way, alternatingly with "Captain America" throughout this book, while using "Steve Rogers" when discussing the character when he is out of uniform or when the conversation is about Rogers specifically rather than Cap or to clarify when describing situations in which there is more than one Captain America) on a plane flight back from England where he has interacted with Captain Britain. Gruenwald initiates no massive reboot. His previous role as

editor for this title prior to writing the comic certainly influences his expertise, but he could have still revamped things dramatically. Things change over the course of his decade as writer, but he feels no need to incorporate massive change all at once. The run on the comic is very much about the process and not about initiating change for its own sake.

Basic rules matter to Gruenwald and he is not interested in disregarding the past, but he also has a specific idea of what "continuity" means. In his editor's comments on the letters page of *Invincible Iron Man* #217, he explains that he is not interested in a continuity that sacrifices art:

> [Continuity is not] a slavish single-minded devotion to trivial details found in ancient storylines and a strange compulsion to resurrect and glorify said details at the expense of other story values. That, my friends, is indeed a problem that certain comics writers have been afflicted with, but that isn't "continuity." That's an obsessive love for trivia [qtd. in "Mark Gruenwald on 'Continuity'"].

He is criticizing those who confuse completion with art. Instead, in the same column, he writes, "What is most important is that a writer stay true to the spirit and basic legend of the character." This is important because every pre-established character, perhaps especially Cap in the Marvel comics universe, has a "basic legend" that must be honored. The writer needs to maintain and stay true to that, but not at the expense of watering down the character or, most significantly, compromising the character just to check off boxes of verified continuity. Gruenwald continues stories and keeps characters consistent, but he resists the compulsion to let trivia dictate storytelling.

He maintains the basics of the comic and the character, but he also creates something new. Over the course of his tenure, he changes and modifies many things without ever compromising the character. This 137-issue run is worth studying in detail because of several key reasons. First, the aforementioned continuity of having one writer over a long period gives the reader a unique opportunity (for *Captain America* readers, at least) to see an essential character under one creator. While perhaps this run did not set up the specific template for Captain America's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) adventures, it did provide a contemporary refocusing of the character that ultimately led toward the film version (and Gruenwald's version of Captain America is certainly represented in the MCU interpretation).

As Gruenwald develops his take on the character in these issues, Steve Rogers' identity is more closely aligned to the Avengers and adventuring in general with less pretense of a "normal life" that is seen in other characters (and was interpreted in *Captain America* in the first half of the 1980s). Gruenwald shows that Steve Rogers is Captain America and Captain America is

a full-time job. Again, referencing Gruenwald's first few issues, Steve Rogers and his personal interactions with others get more panel time than Cap in uniform, but this serves as a way of transitioning to stories in which Cap and Rogers overlap (without much need for a secret identity). This is a way of organically shifting toward the portrayal Gruenwald is most interested in providing—Steve Rogers is not an escape from Captain America (or vice versa) because the mission never ends.

In two of Gruenwald's first few issues, Captain America's sidekick at the time, Nomad, is given the heavy lifting of masked heroics. Why would a creator take over a comic and immediately minimize the hero's central adventures in favor of a sidekick character he eventually intends to write out as a full-time character? It is because Gruenwald is no typical writer—he saw a longer-term plan of building up recurring supporting characters and giving Cap himself more significant challenges than a standard "recurring villain of the month" motif. Maybe he planned to write Nomad out of the comic from the beginning, but he also knew that writing in such a way that lead to organic change to pave the way for a pointed return would be more interesting than just having the character leave without setting it up.

The second reason a serious study of Gruenwald's run is essential is that these issues can be used to discuss the writing techniques and tendencies of a writer who deserves to be in the conversation of the premiere comic writers of his generation. A serious academic study of his work is as warranted as it is for the most revered writers of his generation. Gruenwald's era has perhaps lacked the cultural cache that is deserved. For example, aside from the character of Crossbones in the MCU (and he is tangential in the MCU at best and certainly not depicted in any way that evokes the character from these comics), one of the most direct references to Gruenwald's original work on this comic is a gag outside of the literal movies. Kevin Feige, announcing the titles for the films in Marvel's "Phase Three" in October 2014, first announced Captain America's third film by presenting a graphic that read *Captain America: Serpent Society* ("Full Marvel Phase 3 Announcement"). The Serpent Society is a key group of villains that feature prominently throughout Gruenwald's long run and will be discussed in detail in this book, predominantly in Chapter Seven. By the end, Feige laughs off the *Serpent Society* subtitle as inferior and unveils the film as *Captain America: Civil War*, promising a film based on a storyline that took place long after Gruenwald's time on the comic. A serious discussion of Gruenwald's work is, in light of such dismissals, necessary.

Third, a single sustained run by a writer will help us see how comic content, especially in terms of storytelling and influence from the exterior world, evolves and changes from 1985 to 1995, a period of amazing upheaval

in both the world at large, and the artform and industry of comic books. Even more significantly, this analysis will be through the lens of Captain America, a highly influential character in the Marvel comics universe. By the mid-nineties, the industry was in clear decline (both in regard to sales and creative perception) and the creative solution was an endless wave of long-form stories and crossovers that promised too often to "change everything," and could be seen as efforts more designed to create headlines than to create work of artistic value. The industry was suffering because of this. The '90s valued vigilante characters and violence in a way that made a character like Captain America look antiquated. The social and political evolution of this ten-year-period will be discussed as well. Looking at how Gruenwald dealt with the volatility of this era will help us understand it overall, especially considering how both culture and comic crossovers enter into Cap's universe and some of those "edgier" elements affect Cap's world. Perhaps the comic is not typically political in an overt way (and Steve Rogers' unwillingness to choose political sides is certainly a reason for that), but there are many underlying political elements that give us great insight into the era.

This book will provide necessary study of a character, a comics writer, and an era by looking at various aspects of Gruenwald's run. These three elements are intertwined throughout this book. This book is structured into three parts: "Patriotic Symbolism," "Villainous Opposition," and "Death and Distractions." The first section includes a chapter on Gruenwald's use of symbolism (Chapter One); patriotism in different guises (Chapters Two and Three); and the generational tension inherently at play in these specific comics and how it reflects political and patriotic differences (Chapter Four). The second section begins with a chapter about Red Skull and the looming presence of World War II even in the Cold War 1980s and post–Cold War 1990s (Chapter Five), continues with a discussion of Gruenwald's deliberate intentions to create ideologically driven villains and what that says about his interpretation of the Captain America character (Chapter Six), and concludes with an analysis of how the depiction of the Serpent Society is a complicated critique of American Labor Unions (Chapter Seven). Finally, the third part discusses the vigilante nature of heroes and villains in comparison to Cap's sense of justice (Chapter Eight); how the comic falls into the trappings of the '80s "War on Drugs" era—and where it pushes back, specifically in regard to the "Streets of Poison" storyline that runs through issues #372–378 (Chapter Nine); and how Captain America and Mark Gruenwald approach death in the "Fighting Chance" storyline (Chapter Ten). This is an important investigation into a crucial period of American comics and culture. This book is organized so that each section will provide the

reader with a better overall understanding of the era and the context, building upon each preceding chapter until we know the importance of the era, both to comics and culture.

My research for this book, obviously, starts with the primary source material—*Captain America*, Vol. 1, issues 307–422, 424–443 (as well as editorials and notes Gruenwald and other editors wrote in letter pages of this title and other related titles). I have also delved into the available interviews with Gruenwald, and whatever available scholarship and popular articles that exist. I also use research from more academic perspectives to help form the type of scholarship I wish to create with this book.

Gruenwald himself died in August of 1996, after a heart attack at 43, leaving a legacy remarkable despite his early passing. Obviously, that legacy should have been greater, but the artifacts that remain are something to value. After reading this book, I hope the reader has a greater appreciation of his work and how it helped truly shape a defining character and both the era in which these comics were written and beyond.