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BATMAN UNAUTHORIZED

VIGILANTES, JOKERS, AND HEROES IN
GOTHAM CITY

Edited by
DENNIS O'NEIL
with LEAH WILSON



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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the meme, and the meme belonged to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. But not for long.

I'll be happy to elucidate.

I'll begin with a bit of history that may already be familiar to you. It concerns a young man who was living in Cleveland in 1934 and loved science fiction. One sleepless night, he had an idea. As he later described it, "All of a sudden it hits me. I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one—*only more so*." The next day, he described his brainstorm to an artist friend and together they created a fictional character who became an international icon and, among other accomplishments, created an industry that spawned hundreds—thousands?—of imitations. The youthful brainstormer was writer Jerry Siegel, his artist friend was Joe Shuster, and their creation was Superman, a meme—call it the *costumed superhero meme*.

Meme?

Allow me to offer a definition from no less an authority than the Oxford English Dictionary: "An element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, especially imitation." So architecture is a meme. Fashion's a meme. The birthday song is a meme. Anything you pass on by imitation is a meme.

A moment's thought will convince you that costumed superheroes are memes and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created one when they created Superman. Of course, they had no way of knowing that's what they did because Richard Dawkins wouldn't coin the word for another forty-two years or so. Dr. Dawkins, a geneticist, posits that these incorporeal

memes behave a lot like biological *genes*: that is, they mutate and evolve, and in the process affect the world around them.

To end the Superman creation story quickly (the better to get to the subject of this book): Four frustrating years after Superman's creation, Joe and Jerry finally sold their baby to a new publishing medium, comic books. To call the character's reception a sensation would not, for once, be an exaggeration. Superman's publishers had themselves a smasheroo and pretty soon they began to attempt a duplication of their success.

And at last, panting slightly and just a bit impatient, we come to our real subject, Batman.

It would be nice to say that Bill Finger and Bob Kane, flushed with youthful creative energy, got together and decided to produce a classic hero for this new medium, comic books, and devised a character and an iconography that would endure for generations. Nice, but wrong. Particulars are blurred by time and by the fact that probably these early comics guys weren't thinking about posterity—may not have been aware that they were creating a language, a genre, and a publishing form, so they weren't making notes, even mental notes, and may not have been concerned with much beyond solving the problems in front of them. But we can feel safe in saying that Batman exists because Superman was successful. Liberal arts majors of my generation, those who have managed to avoid working in the media, may feel that art is pure—"a holy chore," as one writer put it. Holy it may be—the jury's still out—but whatever else it may be, it is also, often, a business. This is not new. Writers, painters, sculptors, actors—anyone whose work does not involve food and shelter—need patrons who can supply them with roofs and dinner, which is why Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Michelangelo painted the big ceiling, to cite just three of many obvious examples.

I didn't know either Bill Finger or Bob Kane well enough to ever engage in soul-baring with them, but I'd bet the mortgage money that one of the reasons they got into comics was as old as rocks: the need to eat. Both were Jewish and career opportunities for Jewish storytellers were limited in the '30s. Radio might have seemed, and maybe was, the domain of theater people and ex-vaudevillians; the pulps offered scant opportunities to Jews; book publishing then and now is generally iffy.

There were the movies, for those willing to gamble on a move west, but these were young men for whom a trip to an unknown land—California—might have been daunting.

And suddenly, there were comic books. Maybe really not all that suddenly; comics had been around for a few years, mostly reprints of newspaper material. But this new outfit, National Allied Publications, was buying original stuff: action, adventure, cowboys, airplane pilots, detectives, all staples of the pulps, but now there was another market for this kind of derring-do story. It was a strange market, to be sure; no one knew what the rules were, or if there even were rules, and the money wasn't great. But it *was* money. And these were young guys, in their teens and twenties, some of them still living with their parents. They didn't need much. And besides, if they were anything like the young guys of my comic book generation, they were happy to be getting any reward at all for writing stories and drawing pictures.

So an editor at this Jewish owned and operated publishing house, National Allied Publications, which had no prohibitions against Jews and was seeking the next Superman, asked a cartoonist known as Bob Kane to generate a caped and costumed do-gooder. Bob enlisted the help of his friend, a writer named Bill Finger, and . . . what happened next? Who did exactly what, and when? Accounts vary. But somehow, together, Messrs. Finger and Kane presented the editor with the Bat-Man, who made his debut in *Detective Comics* #27, dated May 1939, and . . . lightning struck twice. Another hit! Another Superman?

Well, no. Oh, there were, and are, similarities: the double identity, the cape and tights, the devotion to crime-fighting. But the meme created by Siegel and Shuster was already mutating. This Bat-Man bore far more resemblance to one of Bill Finger's favorite pulp heroes than to his stablemate, Superman. That hero was the Shadow, an extraordinary man but a man nevertheless. He was born on Earth; he couldn't fly; he was tough as tungsten but not impervious to bullets, explosions, car crashes, or even really enthusiastic clunks on the head. His tools were enormous detective skills, a certain ruthlessness, a cadre of helpers, a disguise, a vast knowledge of his city. Subtract some of the ruthlessness and decrease the size of the cadre and I've just described Batman. I doubt that anyone realized how basically different Batman was from his older brother, the one with the red

cape, nor cared. They were making it all up as they went along, inventing a faux mythology and the means to express it by meeting deadlines and getting the job done.

Comics and superheroes were popular during the war years and immediately after, and then, change began in earnest. The characters of Superman and Batman and their home medium, comic books, began an ongoing process of parallel evolution. The medium went from being considered okay entertainment for children, a perception encouraged by the publishers; to, in the witch-hunting '50s, being considered pap for the semi-literate and encouraging antisocial behavior among the young; to being a source of campy humor in the '60s; to, finally, a slow recognition of its identity as a valid narrative venue and—dare we whisper it?—an art form.

At the same time, Superman and Batman (and Wonder Woman and other superdoers) were undergoing their own evolution. Superman's story will have to wait for a collection of essays about him.¹ As for Batman . . . here it is, by decades, quick and dirty: '30s: playboy detective with a double identity. '40s: mostly, an ex officio cop—at times he carried a “platinum police badge.” '50s: Gotham's leading citizen whose adventures sometimes involved things like time travel. Call it “science fiction lite.” '60s: a comedian in the early part of the decade, because of a popular television show that played him for laughs. In the latter part of the decade and on to the present, a dark, obsessive avenger, a persona that was always implicit in the mythos, but often ignored.

How dark and obsessive? Depends on who's writing, drawing, and editing the stories. This topic is covered by several of our contributors and I suggest that if you have questions about it, they'll likely supply your answers. All I want to add is that without the evolution I doubt that these characters would still be with us. Remember the costumed superhero meme? You can consider each of Batman's iterations a mutation. Some were evolutionary dead ends, like the badge-toter, and some, like the dark avenger, seemed to have great survival potential. Each, I would suggest, was appropriate for its own era, and when that was no longer true, it morphed into the next adaptation. None were permanently lost.

¹ Like *The Man from Krypton* (BenBella Books 2006).

Even the silliest lurks in the mythos, ready to be resurrected if and when a storyteller finds a use for it.

Well into his sixth decade, Batman is, belatedly, respectable, recognized not only as a pop culture icon, but also as a classic character, a good subject for speculation and examination—a good subject, that is, for a book of essays by knowledgeable and thoughtful writers. You're holding that book.

Dennis O'Neil
Nyack, NY
2007

Robert Brian Taylor labels Batman's genre—accurately, I think—“pulp noir.” This is a very small club; few characters are members, and there are uncommon problems in taking those characters from the printed page to the big screen, which Mr. Taylor will tell you about. Along the way, he'll speculate on the difficulties of reinventing classic heroes, whether to make them acceptable to contemporary audiences or to export them to different media. It's a thoughtful, interesting look at pop culture and a good introduction to everything that follows it.

KEEPING IT REAL IN GOTHAM

ROBERT BRIAN TAYLOR

It was early 2005. Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* was well into post-production and slated to open that June. Meanwhile, filming on Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* was underway for a summer 2006 release. And it seemed like every fourth day I would find myself embroiled in a heated debate over which would end up being the better film. Though I had high hopes for both, I figured the safer bet was *Superman Returns*. My argument was a simple one, and went something like this: Both directors were up to the task, and the casts for each movie looked solid on paper. However, Nolan was making one huge mistake choosing Ra's al Ghul—a power-hungry scientist who discovers the secret of immortality—to serve as the film's primary villain. Ra's was an awful choice, not because of the non-comic-reading public's total unfamiliarity with him (though that had to be a concern of the studio's), but rather because no Batman movie featuring a guy who can live forever could be taken all that seriously.¹

¹ Before the geek uprising begins, let's get this out of the way up front: For the sake of

Of all the mega-popular superheroes, it is Batman and his universe that are the most grittily realistic. He is not faster than a speeding bullet. He doesn't swing around Manhattan with the proportional strength of a spider. Batman cannot fly, shoot laser beams from his eyes, or regrow damaged body tissue. He's a guy who puts on a mask, blocks out the pain, and takes to the streets of Gotham City every night to beat evil into a bloody pulp. The world Batman inhabits isn't the same fanciful, brightly colored comic book macrocosm of Superman or Spider-Man, at least it shouldn't be, despite several attempts to turn it into one. I'm looking at you, Adam West and Joel Schumacher. Batman thrives in a pulp-noir universe, where his acts of heroism are more mundane and yet more titillating—the brutal disarming of a knife-wielding thug, with the snap of broken bone, deep in the shadows of some Gotham back alley. The characters who occupy Batman's universe can get hurt, even paralyzed—just ask Barbara Gordon. Sometimes they die.

More often than not, the villains Batman fights, from the street hoodlums up to the major heavies, aren't fantastically gifted, either. The most memorable, the most enduring, of Batman's rogues gallery are the ones who are merely human. They are sociopaths, thieves, and gangsters to be sure, but they're made of the same flesh, blood, and guts as Batman. The Joker. Two-Face. The Penguin. The Riddler. Black Mask. These are men who certainly do great harm . . . but without the help of telekinesis or being able to shapeshift. Sure, reading a comic that has Superman and Darkseid pummeling the crap out of each other can be fun, but it's ultimately two indestructible gods whaling on each other in space. Reading a comic that has Batman matching wits and then punches with the Joker operates on a much smaller scale, but in the end makes for a more intense and dramatic experience.

That's why sticking Ra's al Ghul in a Batman movie seemed like a very bad idea. In the Batman funny books, throwing in a guy who can live

this essay, we'll be labeling Ra's as an immortal. To be nitpicky, he needs his beloved Lazarus Pits to continue his eternal regeneration, and it's been said that the Pits have less and less an effect the more Ra's uses them, meaning that eventually, someday, far, far into the future, Ra's could finally reach his life's end. But come on—it's been written that Ra's is at least 450 years old in current DC continuity. Plus, one of the guy's nicknames is the Immortal. So he's *virtually* unkillable, which is good enough for me to stick that immortal tag on him.

forever is at least understandable. Batman's comic universe contains hundreds of characters, overflows into the DC Universe at large, and has been in existence for more than sixty years—of course an immortal is eventually going to show up. (This doesn't entirely let Batman comic writers off the hook, but we'll get to that a bit later.) The Batman films, however, are extremely condensed peeks into Batman's world that should be built upon the most basic and powerful of the Dark Knight's major thematic elements. The tone of the comic has wavered over the years—there was a sci-fi infusion in the late '50s, and the campiness of '60s live-action television series carried over into comics for a while as well—but the character has always worked best when writers return him to his pulp roots: Batman's a regular guy with a scarred psyche who uses his skills as a fighter and as a detective to protect the people of Gotham from the same fate that befell his parents—to be murdered by a cold and cowardly thief allowed to run the streets freely because the system doesn't work. The police department is crooked. The judicial system is a mess. In Gotham, Batman is the common man's only hope against the same type of senseless violence that plagues many real-world cities.

Director Tim Burton may have had this in mind when, in 1989, he released his first Batman film—a solid take on the Batman mythos brought down by too much Prince music and a ridiculous final act—but he'd all but forgotten it three years later when *Batman Returns* featured a Catwoman who literally had nine lives. It was the first hint of the supernatural in a big-screen version of the Caped Crusader and the biggest annoyance in a movie that moved Batman from the darkly logical universe that best serves the character to more of a standard comic book world where anything is possible, including Michelle Pfeiffer surviving two falls from Gotham skyscrapers, four gunshot wounds, and a self-inflicted Taser to the mouth. There is also the makeover Tim Burton gave Oswald Cobblepot, a.k.a. the Penguin, to consider. In the original comics Cobblepot was no more than a greedy, power-mad mobster who earned his nickname because of his appearance. He was a short, fat guy with a thing for nice tuxedos. The Penguin in *Batman Returns* has no supernatural powers, but is remade into more of a grotesque, inhuman creature who has more in common with the Lord of the Rings's Gollum than the refined Cobblepot from the comics. Certainly, Gollum and the

Returns version of Cobblepot both have a taste for raw fish heads. *Batman Returns* is an appropriately dark film, but it also remakes Batman's world as more of a fantasy construct—complete with subservient penguins, deadly circus performers, and a touch of the metaphysical. The filmed versions of Catwoman and the Penguin may have served Burton to that end, but they further removed Bruce Wayne from a more tangible reality.

Then Joel Schumacher took over the franchise . . . and things got worse. There's no need to discuss in detail Schumacher's awful remaking of Gotham as a neon-splashed, amusement-park wonderland. That's not the point of this essay. But it is necessary to note here that 1995's *Batman Forever* hinges on a storyline that further drives the series into an illogical fantasy world. In *Forever*, Jim Carrey's Riddler invents a device that literally sucks brainwaves from people's minds, allowing him to exponentially increase his own intelligence. The brain-stealing is represented visually by a greenish beam of neural energy that jumps from the heads of the Riddler's victims to his own—essentially a blast of '50s sci-fi hokum. *Forever* was followed two years later by the much reviled *Batman & Robin*, which introduced to the movies Poison Ivy—the sexy villainess who wields a deadly kiss, super-pheromones, and telekinetic control over plant life. Granted, she exhibits similar superpowers in some of her comic incarnations, but these things tend to come across as ludicrous on the big screen. Heck, even Paul Dini and Bruce Timm knew the Batman universe was better served by scaling back on the fantasy elements whenever possible. Their *Batman: The Animated Series* featured a Poison Ivy whose only superpower was a more plausible immunity to poison. In the cartoon, the poison kiss came courtesy of a synthesized lipstick created from plant toxins. Schumacher, however, had a tendency to focus on the magical claptrap—the more far-fetched, the better—and *Batman & Robin* gave us a Poison Ivy who could sprout killer shrubbery from the ground at will. Yes, they're only comic book movies. But the further the filmmakers drift away from the real world, the less of an impact Batman makes as a character.

That's why it was so disheartening to hear that Ra's al Ghul would serve as Bruce Wayne's main adversary in *Batman Begins*. It was assumed that Nolan's version of the Batman universe would be a return to the more starkly grounded Gotham popularized in comics such as *Batman*:

Year One, Frank Miller's down and dirty prequel. How would Nolan reconcile that levelheaded approach with Ra's al Ghul's more fanciful comic book background, his immortality? Turns out, the solution was easy. In *Begins*, Ra's al Ghul can't actually live forever. His supposed immortality is still integral to the character, but it's cleverly incorporated into the film as a bit of sleight of hand—the real and very mortal Ra's moves about in shadow while a series of disposable decoys front Ra's's army of assassins. It's brilliant how these lines of dialogue from the film, spoken as Liam Neeson's Henri Ducard reveals himself to be the authentic Ra's al Ghul, maintain Ra's's key character trait while still preserving the realism Nolan does indeed strive for in his film:

BRUCE WAYNE: (to a Ra's imposter) You're not Ra's al Ghul.

I watched him die.

DUCARD: (entering from behind Wayne) But is Ra's al Ghul immortal? Are his methods supernatural?

WAYNE: (turning, realizing the solution to the Ra's riddle) Or cheap parlor tricks to conceal your identity, Ra's?

And with that Nolan seamlessly integrates Ra's al Ghul into his no-supernatural-crap version of the Batman universe that is far superior to Burton's and Schumacher's takes on the character. (Not only that, *Begins* ended up being a supremely better movie than Singer's plodding *Superman Returns*—boy, did I back the wrong horse there.) And it's not just Ra's that Nolan gets right. From the Batmobile—extrapolated from real-world tank design—to the other villains in the film—brutish mobster Carmine Falcone and sociopathic psychologist Jonathan Crane, a.k.a. the Scarecrow—Nolan properly reins in the outlandish elements to a point where Batman's universe is only one or two steps removed from our own. There are no supermen from other planets who can save our world here, only a human being with enough determination and loose screws to roam the city dressed like a bat for our protection. Boy, it makes for great drama when things are that simple.

It's a lesson that all caretakers of the Batman mythos would do well to follow, not just those tasked with bringing the character to movie screens. Frank Miller knows this. In an interview conducted by Kim

Thompson and published in *The Comics Journal Library, Volume Two: Frank Miller*, Miller talks about how, in his celebrated Dark Knight series, he strived to restore the human context in the Batman mythos and present the American city in more realistic terms. Miller goes on to say: “As dramatic as it was when Superman teamed up with Batman, or Spider-Man met the Fantastic Four, these were steps taken toward ruining the superhero. Now, modern superhero comics have reached the point where there are so many damn superheroes and so damn much superpower flying around that there’s no room left for anything human.”

It’s too bad the folks at DC don’t always listen to Frank. In the last few years, the people in charge of the Batman comics have made a couple of truly boneheaded decisions that further remove the humanity from the Dark Knight’s universe. Sometimes it’s a little thing—a minor reworking of a character that may look cool on the page but is enough to drive a serious-minded Batman enthusiast crazy. Consider, for example, the 2004 transformation of the Scarecrow into some hideous monstrosity called “the Scarebeast.” Jonathan Crane has always been one of the more low-key members of Batman’s rogues gallery. He’s a meek-looking, spectacled professor who preys on the fear of innocents using a harmful combination of drugs and psychological tactics. He’s a very cool, very nasty, very *human* character. Cillian Murphy played him brilliantly in *Batman Begins*—coldly calculating but totally insane. Yet in the 2004 story arc *As the Crow Flies*, beginning with *Batman* #627, the Penguin succeeded in mutating Crane, turning him into the Scarebeast—a creature that is ten feet tall, possesses super-strength and -agility, has claws instead of fingers, and can release a hallucinogenic gas biologically. He’s essentially one of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Ents crossbred with a werewolf. The transformation was incredibly dopey and turned the Scarecrow into a superhuman, larger-than-life menace that, quite frankly, Batman already has too many of in the comics. Look no further than Clayface and Man-Bat . . . and hope you never see any of them in a Batman film. To defeat the beast, Batman donned a thickly armored Batsuit that would make Tony Stark proud and proceeded to punch the mutated Crane senseless. Though Alfred did pitch in at the end with a well-timed tranquilizer shot. But these punches lacked the thrill of Batman’s more visceral rounds of fisticuffs. When you have a gigantic screeching monster on

one side of a fight and a man wearing a seemingly indestructible suit of techno-armor on the other, it's all too easy to remember that you're just reading a silly comic book where nothing much matters besides the *Bang! Pow! Zap!* of it all. Writers blessed with the opportunity to pen a Batman title should aspire to more.

The Scarebeast eventually turned back into skinny little Jonathan Crane, though the beast within has occasionally emerged to do more damage, adding a Jekyll-and-Hyde dimension to the Scarecrow that the character certainly didn't need. And Crane isn't the only Batman villain who has undergone this kind of misguided reinvention. Killer Croc was originally Waylon Jones, a man afflicted by a rare medical condition that gave him reptilian-like skin and made him an outcast of society. People shunned him because of his strange appearance, which in turn drove him to a life of crime. It isn't exactly Shakespeare, but it's a compelling enough backstory. These days, however, Croc is usually written as 95 percent dinosaur—a lizard-headed abomination with more teeth than soul. And when fighting these exaggerated villains, Batman often abandons the skills that make him an intriguing hero: his wit, his gift for strategy, his resourcefulness. Those things tend to get tossed in favor of a clunky metal Batsuit. (And riddle me this: If Batman can take down a rampaging Scarebeast with a simple costume change, why is the Joker always so much of a problem?) Still, the transfigured Scarecrow and amped-up Killer Croc are minor in the grand scheme of things and easily retconned down the line. What about intrusions of the fantastical that aren't easily erased? Ones that permanently alter the fabric of Batman's universe for the worse? DC has erred here recently as well—and in a big way.

The 1988 death of Robin #2, Jason Todd, was originally the result of a cheap gimmick. DC Comics set up a toll-free number where Batman fans could call and vote on whether Jason should live or die in the *A Death in the Family* story arc (which ran from *Batman* #426–429). Death won, and Jason was viciously murdered by the Joker. Then something interesting happened. Over the years, Jason's death grew in meaning as it weighed heavily on Bruce Wayne's mind. Remember, Bruce takes to the streets at night as Batman to prevent the tragedy of his parents' murders from happening to others. So what does it say that he couldn't save

his own protégé? What is the purpose of Batman if he can't even protect the ones he loves? The effects of Jason's loss have been effectively explored by many writers in the years since his death, always symbolized by Jason's Robin costume hanging solemnly behind glass in the Batcave. Bruce remains haunted by Jason's death, and it informs many of his decisions later on (for example, his reluctance to take on Robin #3, Tim Drake). What started as a publicity stunt ended up adding yet another human dimension to Batman as a character. That is, until DC went and ruined it all by bringing Jason Todd back to life in a blaze of retconning and mind-blowingly ridiculous fantasy/sci-fi drivel (culminating in Judd Winick's *Under the Hood* story arc, *Batman* #635-641).

Rather than attempt to personally explain how Jason Todd came back to life some fifteen-plus real-world years after his death, let us instead turn to Wikipedia for the full story. And I quote:

... Jason indeed had died at the hands of the Joker, but when Superboy-Prime alters reality from the paradise dimension in which he is trapped (six months after his death), Jason is restored to life and breaks out of his coffin, but collapses thereafter and is hospitalized. After spending a year in a coma and subsequently as an amnesiac vagrant, he is recognized by Talia al Ghul, who restores his health and memory by immersing him in a Lazarus Pit in which her father Ra's al Ghul is also bathing. ("Jason Todd")

Superboy-Prime? Paradise dimension? Lazarus Pit? God, I hate this stuff. But looking past all the supernatural bullshit, the biggest crime committed here is that bringing Jason Todd back to life snuffs out one of the harshest, most brutally real chapters of Bruce Wayne's life—makes it as if it never happened. One of the inspired things about Jason's death was that it was (seemingly) permanent, unlike most other comic book demises, where you roll your eyes and say sarcastically, "Yeah, right. That'll last." Heck, DC used to print a quote on the back of the *A Death in the Family* trade paperback from former *Batman* writer Denny O'Neil that said, "It would be a really sleazy stunt to bring him back."

Sleazy? Sure. Also monumentally stupid, especially when you're lib-

erally using alternate dimensions and characters from other timelines just to dramatically legitimize the fact that Jason is breathing again. (Note to DC: It didn't work.) The resurrection of Jason Todd is the strongest example of what happens when you mix Batman's universe with too much fantasy hogwash—the whole endeavor becomes laughable. And that's the one thing you never want with Batman's world, a place where the all-too-real screams from Arkham Asylum pierce the air, where criminals use knives and guns instead of superpowers to threaten innocents. But if the Joker can't really kill anyone without them being magically reborn, what's the point of Bruce Wayne putting on the Batsuit in the first place? Even worse, what's the point of us caring?

This is the third of ROBERT BRIAN TAYLOR's Smart Pop essays, as he has previously written about the kickass women of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and how Brian Michael Bendis spins better Spider-Man tales than Sam Raimi. He writes a weekly TV column for *The Herald*, the daily newspaper of Rock Hill, South Carolina, although he currently lives in the Pittsburgh area with his wife, April, and daughter, Zoe. You can find him online at www.robertbriantaylor.com.

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