

THE GUARDIAN OF GOTHAM

BATMAN

For over 50 years, Batman has captured the imagination of comic, TV and movie fans around the world.

By: Scott Devine



In the city of Gotham crime and corruption run rampant like an incurable cancer. Thieves and murderers prey on the innocent and the police seem powerless to stop the city's downfall into chaos. As night falls on this decaying metropolis, however, a caped figure emerges from the shadows to strike fear in the hearts of all criminals. He is the Batman and for over five decades Gotham's vigilante has been protecting the city's streets and answering the cries of the innocent.

In 1938, *Detective Comics* (later known as *DC Comics*) introduced Superman to the world, ushering in the era of the superhero and forever changing the concept of the comic book. Following the immediate success of Superman, *DC* editor Vince Sullivan gave eighteen-year-old artist Bob Kane the opportunity to create a superhero that *DC* could market along with the man of steel.

FIRST FLIGHT . . . Batman made his first appearance in *Detective Comics* in 1939. © DC COMICS

SIDE KICK . . . The original Robin became Nightwing, the second Robin was killed off and the new Robin had his own mini-series, but he's still not in the movies. © DC COMICS

To create his superhero, Kane drew from several childhood memories, including the caped villain from the low-budget film *The Bat Whispers* and a book he read about the inventions of Leonardo Da Vinci (which included a flying machine that had the look of a man with bat wings). To round out the character of his Bat-man, Kane used qualities from adventurers such as *The Lone Ranger*, *The Shadow* and *Zorro*, the Spanish count who donned a mask to fight against tyranny.

Kane figured that a man dressed in a bat costume would have a natural advantage over criminals. "I thought that the bat costume would frighten the denizens of the underworld. I mean, this awesome figure all in black, with batwings, scared the hell out of them." With the basic concept of the Batman ironed out, Kane still had to come up with a strong motivation for the superhero's crimefighting actions.

When Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered before his eyes, the boy vows vengeance against the killer and all others who prey on innocent victims. The orphaned millionaire then spends the next

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fifteen years training his body and mind to perfection for his personal war against crime. Realizing the need to hide his true identity, Wayne tries to think of a disguise. At that point, a bat comes crashing through the window and Wayne sees his future—"Yes, father. I shall become a bat."

Batman made his first appearance in 1939 in *Detective Comics* issue #27, and became an overnight success. The early Batman stories, however, portrayed the Dark Knight as a much more violent figure than current fans have come to know. The Batman of old felt no remorse in using a gun, breaking the necks of henchmen or tossing them off of buildings to certain death.

In early 1940 Kane decided to tone Gotham's vigilante down a bit and make him a more respectable character. First off, Kane decided that the Batman should not kill, and since then the Dark Knight has not actively taken a life—although he has come close to breaking this vow on several occasions. Kane also decided that the Batman should have an aide in fighting crime, so in *Detective Comics* issue #38 Robin, "The Boy Wonder" was introduced, hereby giving Batman an ally as well as an added responsibility.

When acrobat Dick Grayson's parents are murdered by Gotham mob lord Boss Zucco, Batman takes the young boy under his wing and trains him in the ways

DARK DAYS . . . Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* series became a sensation and helped inspire the film's dark overtones. © DC COMICS

of crimefighting. Clad in a bright green, red and yellow costume and constantly spouting jokes, the Boy Wonder contrasts the dark style of the Batman.

Robin, however, acts as more than just a sidekick. Dick Grayson offers Bruce Wayne the chance to be a friend, mentor and most importantly, a father figure to the young boy. The "Dynamic Duo" have the common bond of losing their parents to the ravages of crime and know that they can rely on each other. The Batman's greatest fear, and one he'd have to confront in the 1980s, is that Robin would be hurt or killed fighting the criminal element.

By the spring of 1940, the tales of the Batman had gained such popularity that the Dark Knight was awarded his own comic book, an honor at that time held only by Superman. In the early issues of *Detective Comics*, the Batman had battled and bested several dangerous criminals such as: Clayface, Hugo Strange, The Monk and the evil Doctor Death, but none of these characters could compare to the newest bad guy in Gotham. *Batman* issue #1 presented the first appearance of the Dark Knight's greatest foe and the most well-known villain in comic book history—The Joker.

With his clown-like appearance, fantastic crimes and total disregard for human life, the Joker has plagued the city of Gotham countless times. This Harlequin of Hate, however, means more to Batman than just another bust. In the Joker, the Batman sees a distorted version of himself—an obsessed man driven to the edge of insanity. In fact, the Joker's past parallels the Batman in many ways. The Joker's insane condition, as seen in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's 1988 comic *The Killing Joke*, was the result of the accidental death of his wife and unborn son coupled with his facial disfigurement caused by swimming through a vat of chemicals during a robbery.

As the 1940s rolled on, America was drawn into World War II and the Dynamic Duo were quick to

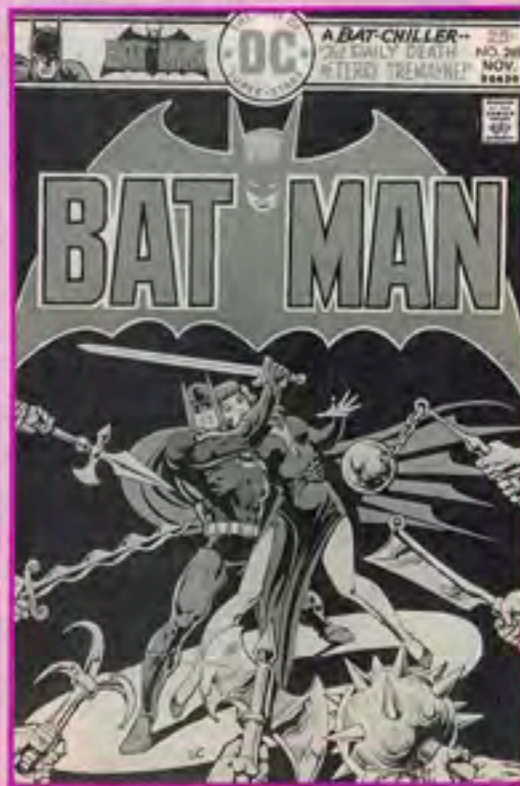
show their patriotic spirit. During the war years, many of the cover shots of Batman showed the Dark Knight and the Boy Wonder asking Americans to support the war effort by buying war bonds and stamps. Likewise, the Batman stories of that time had the Caped Crusaders battling Japanese and Nazi spies in Gotham City and around the globe.

The war years also saw the first silver screen appearance of Batman and Robin. During the 1940s Columbia Pictures released two fifteen episode serials of the adventures of the dynamic duo. These low budget films, however, did absolutely nothing to further the legend of the Batman. Not only were they poorly written and filmed, but they also contained slews of racial stereotypes.

As World War II ended, the Dynamic Duo went back to what they did best, fighting criminals. During the rest of the 1940s, Batman and Robin kept their adventures within the walls of Gotham City, slugging it out with the Joker and a new set of villains who included: The Catwoman, The Penguin and Two-Face.

As the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union heated up in the 1950s, several paranoid figures in the Ameri-

SEVENTIES STAR . . . Batman underwent many changes over the years, including a darker version in the '70s that contrasted the camp aspects inspired by the '60s TV series. © DC COMICS



can government began accusing fellow politicians of being Communists. This subversive paranoia carried over into the film and comic book industry and even the Dynamic Duo were not immune.

In 1954, Dr. Frederic Wertham, psychiatrist for the New York Department of Hospitals released his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed comics were

warping the young minds of America with ideas of violence and perversity. Wertham's attacks were targeted at many different comic books, but he stunned the comic community with his absurd accusation that Batman and Robin were gay lovers. Even though Wertham's ideas were quickly refuted, the chaos he started had a lasting impact on

MOVIE MAN ... Michael Keaton's portrayal of the caped crusader met with both critical and public approval.



JOKE MAN ... Jack Nicholson proved to be the perfect Joker in the 1989 blockbuster.

the Batman and the rest of the comic book industry.

As a result of Wertham's attacks, hundreds of comics folded under rising public criticism and a new form of censorship arose in 1954 with the creation of the Comics Code Authority. Comic companies were forced to submit their work for review because the majority of newsstands would not carry a comic that didn't carry the CCA stamp of approval.

Gotham's favorite son was not only subject to the wrath of CCA, but the 1950s and early 1960s also saw the Batman stripped of his "Dark Knight" mystique. During this difficult decade, the Batman spent much of his time globe-trotting, time traveling and dealing with silly sci-fi plots about criminal aliens. Even the Joker underwent a change in character during the 1950s. Instead of murdering people and trying to eliminate the Batman, the Crown Prince of Crime was reduced to a bungling stooge who relied on wacky props and even wackier crimes.

By the mid 1960s, Batman's sales had dropped considerably and the Dark Knight was in danger of disappearing from the comic racks. He found his salvation, however, in the same device that had been tapping into comic sales for over a decade—television. In 1966, ABC-TV brought the caped crusader into the homes of millions and began Batman's "campy" era. The hour long-show,

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which starred Adam West and Burt Ward as the Dynamic Duo, became an instant success, airing twice weekly and ranking as one of the Nielsen top-rated television programs.

Following the cancellation of the television show, the editors at DC felt the time had come to update the Batman's history and also restore the crimefighter to a darker look. In the 1970s, Batman once again became a creature of the night, busting the criminals and corrupt politicians of Gotham City. The Batman comics also became much more psychological, probing the minds of criminals and looking at the Batman's own obsessive behavior. By the end of the 1970s, the Batman had once again become a popular comic figure, but nothing could prepare him for the events that would come in the next decade.

The beginning of the 1980s flew in with great change for Gotham's Guardian. For the past several years, Dick Grayson had been growing into manhood and had entered college. The Batman realized that the time had come for Robin to move on and create his own destiny. In 1983, Grayson left Batman to become the superhero "Nightwing" and street orphan Jason Todd became the new Robin. Many comic fans, however, were dissatisfied with the new Boy Wonder, saying that he was nothing more than a copy of Dick Grayson. The editors of DC heard the public's cry and used the opportunity to correct this mistake and gain some publicity at the same time.

In 1988, DC released the mini-issue series, entitled *Death in the Family* and asked fans to call in and vote whether or not to kill the new Robin. The Boy Wonder lost by a narrow margin (72 votes) and was subsequently killed in an explosion. Realizing, however, that the Batman needs a Robin, DC Comics spared no time in giving the Dark Knight a new side kick. In 1990, Tim Drake became the third person to wear the Boy Wonder's costume and his character has been so successful that DC has already published two Robin mini-series with more in the works.

As the 1980s rolled on, the dark psychological trend of the Batman stories kept growing until it reached its apex in Frank Miller's 1986 comic masterpiece, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. This four issue mini-series, set ten years after the Batman retires, shows a bleak future where crime rules the city and the world is on the brink of World War III. A bitter and middle-aged Bruce Wayne once again dons his cape and cowl to bring justice to a world gone mad. This time, however, Batman's violent actions draw fire from the Gotham politicians and even the White House. In the end, the Dark Knight is forced to come to terms with himself and face Superman in a fight to the death.



MOVIE VERSION . . . The comic adaptation of the 1989 smash movie was a big hit on comic stands.
© DC COMICS

Still flying off the success of *The Dark Knight Returns* and renewed comic book sales, the Batman hit his fiftieth birthday well in stride. Regarded by many as the "Year of the Bat," 1989 was by far the biggest year in the crimefighter's extensive history. Not only did DC introduce its third Batman title, *Legends of the Dark Knight*, but the Caped Crusader's birthday also featured the release of a film that would make box-office history.

When Warner Brother's *Batman* hit the silver screen in the summer of 1989, everyone expected success, but no one could foresee



NEW DIRECTIONS . . . The *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel proved the Dark Knight was successful in many visual forms. © DC COMICS

that the movie would make \$52 million in its opening weekend and go on to become the fastest money-making film ever made. Directed by Tim Burton (*Edward Scissorhands*), written by Sam Hamm and Warren Kaeren and visually designed by the late Anton Furst, who won an Academy Award for his work, *Batman* beautifully captured the true look and feel of the Dark Knight.

And what about the Dark Knight of the 1990s? Ever since the release of the *Batman* movie, Gotham's favorite son has been enjoying ever-increasing popularity. This summer's film release should only add to the excitement. On June 19th, Warner Brothers will release *Batman Returns*, the long-awaited sequel to the 1989 smash. With Tim Burton once again directing and Michael Keaton reprising his original role—not to mention Danny DeVito starring as The Penguin and Michelle Pfeiffer as The Catwoman, the sequel promises to outdo its predecessor. Also, in the wake of renewed Batmania, DC plans to unveil its fourth Batman title, *Shadow of the Bat*.

Looking at the success of *Batman*, many fans wonder what has given the Dark Knight such wide appeal. To Batman creator Bob Kane, however, the answer is quite clear, "Batman enjoys his longevity because every person relates to Batman . . . 'There but for the grace of God go I.' I can also be Batman, if I were tall, dark and handsome and rich, and had built my body to perfection."

Maybe we all can't be the Batman, but that has yet to stop us from picking up a videotape or comic and sharing in the never-ending adventures of Gotham's greatest guardian. ●