

SALEM LITERATURE

Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: Heroes & Superheroes, First Edition

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

AUTHOR: Miller, Frank

ARTIST: Frank Miller (illustrator); Klaus Janson (inker); Lynn Varley (colorist); John Costanza (letterer)

PUBLISHER: DC Comics

FIRST SERIAL PUBLICATION: 1986

FIRST BOOK PUBLICATION: 1987

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns was a limited-edition, four-issue series published from February to June of 1986 by DC Comics. While the series is collectively referred to as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the original publication of each issue bore its own distinct title on the cover. The series' packaging was unique for the time: each issue was far longer than the usual comic book and sported square binding, glossy pages, and card-stock covers.

Frank Miller, the book's writer and illustrator, had long fought for more creative freedom for comic writers and authors. Dick Giordano, editor in chief of DC Comics, had wanted to make DC a more attractive place for the best writers and artists; therefore, he gave Miller unprecedented freedom with one of DC's core characters. The series was enormously popular with not only comics fans but also a much wider audience, and each issue went through multiple printings. The graphic novel collection remains in print, while a large number of hardcover, special, collector's, and "absolute" editions have been published.

PLOT

The quality of the book's packaging and format announces a different kind of Batman story, something completely removed from the status quo maintained in the many ongoing series featuring the character. Readers are quickly introduced to a world that crosses the reality of 1986 with the comic book world of Gotham City: Ronald Reagan (or a Reagan-caricature) is president, and he appears bent on courting a full-bore nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the city streets are dark and lurid places, filled with hyperviolent gangs, prostitutes, and armed psychopathic loners huddled in trenchcoats. The few good citizens are mostly frightened. They rush home from work and take cover indoors. There, their fears are fed by the television, by a breathless news media that sensationalizes stories of child kidnapping and "nun murder" before cheerfully and mindlessly segueing to assorted tidbits of celebrity wackiness.

In this world, the superheroes are gone. Many are dead, some abandoned Earth entirely, and the few who remained were forced into retirement. Having apparently retired the Batman identity some time ago, Bruce Wayne has become a reclusive old man. He drinks heavily most nights. The story that follows is one of reawakening. Wayne tries to remain in his mansion and sit and watch as the world slides further into chaos on his television. However, he is stirred by some private, yet elemental, force—something he identifies as "the creature in my gut." He begins sleepwalking, haunting the Batcave.

When Harvey Dent, better known as Two-Face and an old foe of Batman, returns to crime and threatens to bomb twin skyscrapers, Batman explodes from retirement. This Batman is no "Goody Two-shoes" in long underwear. He snarls and growls and strikes suddenly from above, below, and out of nowhere. He breaks fingers and shatters spines. He appears to enjoy inspiring terror in criminals.

At the end of the first issue, Batman defeats Two-Face, in whose dual-identity madness he sees "a reflection." In the second issue, he faces down the Mutants, the most powerful gang in Gotham. Driving a gigantic, tank-like version of the Batmobile, he attacks the gang during its meeting at the city dump. When the gang's monstrous leader challenges

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him and calls him an "old coward," Batman finds he cannot resist, and he abandons the Batmobile to fight hand to hand "as a young man would."

The leader defeats Batman, crushing him totally. That he survives at all is only because Carrie Kelly, a teenage girl who has been dressing as Robin and trailing Batman, intervenes and momentarily distracts the mutant leader. Batman retreats to the Batcave. Despite Alfred's pointed reminders about the death of the previous Robin, Batman adopts Carrie as his new sidekick. With her help, he arranges another gathering of the Mutants at a sewage pit. There, he stages another fight with the Mutant leader and, taking advantage of the mud (and other tactics) to slow his opponent, he triumphs.

In the third issue, Miller's increasingly satirical bent takes center stage. Superman is revealed to be active still, but he is a secret tool of the government, reduced to fighting clandestine police actions against Soviet forces. The president orders Superman to intervene in Gotham City, where Batman's example threatens to "rile" the populace. In Gotham, pop psychologist Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, who previously petitioned for the release of Two-Face, now speaks on behalf of the Joker, whom he paints as a victim suffering from something called "Batman psychosis." In the streets, the former Mutant gang members, picking up after Batman's defeat of their leader, call themselves the "Sons of the Batman" and deal out extreme levels of vigilante justice. On television, the talking heads debate whether it is Batman who is most at fault for the current poor state of the world.

Commissioner Jim Gordon retires, and his politically appointed successor, Ellen Yindel, immediately issues an arrest warrant for Batman. Dr. Wolper succeeds in getting the Joker released from Arkham Asylum and booked on a late-night talk show, where he appears alongside a noted German sex therapist. On the night of the program, the police hunt Batman and prevent him from reaching the television studio in time to stop the Joker from using a lethal laughing-gas bomb to kill everyone in the building (including Dr. Wolper) and escape. Pursued by police, Batman and Robin track the Joker to a carnival, where the madman is handing out poisoned cotton candy and popcorn to children. Wounded during their fight, Batman chases the Joker through a funhouse Hall of Mirrors and into the Tunnel of Love, where the two have their final confrontation. Batman resolves to finally kill the Joker, but stops himself just short, unwilling to cross a line he set for himself years ago. The Joker, half-paralyzed in the fight, laughs at Batman's fastidiousness and commits suicide.

In the final issue, the Soviet Union, provoked by U.S. aggression on the tiny, strategically unimportant island of Corto Maltese, launches a preemptive nuclear strike. The president sends Superman to divert the single missile. Superman succeeds, but he is caught in the explosion. The Russian warhead is a specially designed "Coldbringer missile," which emits an atmospheric electromagnetic pulse that effectively blacks out the United States. Panic, rioting, and fires threaten to engulf Gotham until Batman organizes the former members of the Mutant gang into a militia and restores order and control.

Somewhat weakened from his nuclear ordeal, Superman follows presidential orders to take Batman into custody, and they confront each other at the street corner where Bruce Wayne's parents were killed. Batman wears an armored suit plugged into the restored power grid of Gotham and, with the help of his old, crippled friend Green Arrow and some synthesized kryptonite, he manages to defeat Superman. He then dies from an apparent heart attack.

The story closes with the media's reporting on Bruce Wayne's death and the revelation of his secret identity. Following his master's last orders, Alfred activates charges that destroy Wayne Manor, supposedly erasing all of Batman's secrets and closing the book on his legend. At Bruce Wayne's funeral, however, Superman is startled when he hears his friend's heart start to beat again, from within the casket. Before their fight, Batman had apparently taken a pill to fake his death.

Superman winks at a disguised Carrie Kelly and decides not to say anything about Bruce Wayne's condition. The book ends with Batman, Robin, Green Arrow, and the former Mutants gathered in the Batcave. Batman resolves to train his followers in secret, planning for a time when they are needed again.

Michael Keaton as Batman in *Batman Returns*.



(Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

VOLUMES

- *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Unable to keep his dark needs in check, an older Batman emerges from his long, enforced retirement to fight crime in a bleak, hyperviolent, and media-maddened Gotham City. He fights an old enemy/friend, Harvey Dent/Two-Face, in whose monstrosity and dual nature he finds a reflection.
- *Batman: The Dark Knight Triumphant* (1986). Batman clashes with a new, young, and mindless breed of criminal: the pointlessly sadistic Mutant street gang and their gigantic, insane leader. He takes on a new Robin. A confrontation between Batman and Superman, now a government stooge who serves as a secret weapon against the Soviet Union, appears to be inevitable.
- *Batman: Hunt the Dark Knight* (1986). A media-hungry pop psychologist gets his “cured” patient, the Joker, a booking on a late-night talk show, where the madman makes good on his promise to kill everybody in the room. After an amusement-park murder spree, the Joker engages in his final battle with Batman in the Tunnel of Love.
- *Batman: The Dark Knight Falls* (1986). The Soviet Union launches a preemptive nuclear strike. Superman manages to divert the missile, but the electromagnetic pulse blacks out the United States. Batman enforces order in a panicked Gotham. Superman is sent to corral his friend once and for all, and after an epic showdown, the legend of the Dark Knight comes to an end.

CHARACTERS

- *Batman*, a.k.a. *Bruce Wayne*, is an old man, long since retired from crime fighting. When he becomes Batman again, he is a mythic figure, grand and almost operatically violent.
 - *Superman*, a.k.a. *Clark Kent*, acts as a secret weapon for the U.S. government. The president treats him like a pet.
 - *Carrie Kelly*, a.k.a. *Robin*, is a young teenage girl. Her parents are former hippies who tend to forget about her. Inspired by Batman’s reemergence, she takes on the mantle of Robin, first on her own, and then under the tutelage of her idol.
 - *Jim Gordon* is Bruce Wayne’s oldest friend and still the police commissioner of Gotham when the series opens. Thoroughly decent, he is perhaps the most genuinely human character in the book.
 - *The Joker* is a madman, interested only in murder for murder’s sake. He laughs, but there is still something deliberate and calculating about him. He wakes from catatonia when Batman comes out of retirement.
 - *The Mutant Leader* is young, perhaps not yet twenty years old. He is a sadistic sociopath. His fingernails and his teeth are filed to razors. He is unafraid of Batman.
 - *The President*, a caricature of Ronald Reagan, has a shrunken prune face and an incongruously dark, full head of
- Edition*. Ed. H. Beaty Bart and Weiner Stephen. Salem Press, 2012. *Salem Literature Web*. 30 Apr. 2014.

hair. Despite the looming threat of nuclear Armageddon, he remains cheekily optimistic about America's future.

- *Two-Face*, a.k.a. *Harvey Dent*, has spent years in psychotherapy designed to cure him of his dual identity and obsession with the number two. He takes up crime again, threatening to blow up twin skyscrapers.
- *Dr. Bartholomew Wolper* is a liberal psychologist and publicity hound who works first to “cure” Harvey Dent and then to free the Joker.
- *Alfred* is Bruce Wayne's aged, loyal butler and Batman's combat medic.
- *Ellen Yindel* replaces Jim Gordon as Gotham City commissioner. She does her job by the book.
- *Green Arrow*, a.k.a. *Oliver Queen*, is an older man who apparently went up against Superman long ago and lost his arm as a result.

ARTISTIC STYLE

In a word, Miller depicts Batman as “large.” Batman's shoulders are gigantic, filling the panels. His pectorals are massive. His stomach and abdominals resemble the surface of an outsized pineapple grenade, and his biceps and thighs are bloated with muscle. He is drawn out of proportion to the other characters in the work (Superman and the Mutant leader are the only characters who approach him in pure size). Most of the minor players are drawn and inked in a way that seems deliberately crude or indistinct, so that a single characteristic—an enormous belly or a tiny head, for example—is emphasized.

Much of the work is drawn in an exaggerated, aggressive style. Gotham City has tremendous buildings towering at impossible angles, while the streets below are empty and gray. At times, backgrounds disappear entirely and become splashes of watercolor (often gray but also red, orange, and pink) or simply black or white space in which the characters seem to float. The reader is often put in the position of a television viewer, the panels themselves taking on the round-sided shape of a television screen. These panels frequently interject or interrupt the main story's action, commenting on it and, thus, functioning as a kind of randomly chattering Greek chorus.

THEMES

Initially, *Dark Knight Returns* is mostly concerned with age and the gaps between generations. The youthful gang members are the most extreme example of this: they belong to a different, more dangerous and ruder world than the one Batman remembers and upholds. These teenagers do not need any reason to rob, maim, or kill; they do so mostly for fun. Batman represents straighter, more conventional World War II-era values—as when he barks at Robin to “sit up straight” or in his intolerance for foul language—and social order. This is somewhat strange, given Batman's own status as a law-breaking vigilante, one later hunted by the police. The larger implication is that the social order, or that civilization itself, is so broken down that it takes an outsider (even one crazy enough to dress up as a big scary bat) to reestablish some measure of sanity and structure.

Political corruption is a related theme: the mayor of Gotham City replaces Commissioner Gordon (another representative of World War II-era values) with a young woman because his public-relations people tell him it will make him seem “decisive” and help his reelection; a congressman and general divert shipments of heavy automatic weapons to the crazed Mutant street gang; and the president is an old babbler, but not so much of a fool that he cannot use the presumed patriotism of his office to order Superman around and use him as a secret weapon against the Russians.

There is a large element of satire and a winking sense of humor, too, running throughout the work. One of Miller's key targets is the television media. News anchor Lola consistently mixes up the lead on every story (“Commissioner Gordon was shot and killed—no, excuse me, Commissioner Gordon shot and killed . . .”); she has a triangular orange haircut and wears a sweatshirt that reads “All this and brains, too.” Cultural commentators do not debate; they scream, curse, and call one another “fat.” What passes for hard news mostly consists of reporters asking random, angry people on the street what they think or feel.

The book also explores arguments about how directly actions are influenced, or even programmed, by popular media, including television shows, films, songs, and, indeed, comics. Batman's example turns the Mutant street gang into “Sons of the Batman,” and it inspires Carrie Kelly to become Robin. The Joker's psychologist, Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, makes a career out of using Batman as an excuse for his client's crimes, holding him responsible for anything and everything. But Miller's stance on this is ambivalent. The kind of thinking represented by Wolper is clearly a

target; at the same time, Wolper is right in that it is Batman's reemergence that prods the Joker from his catatonic state and back into murder.

IMPACT

In the aftermath of the campy 1960's television show *Batman* (starring Adam West in the title role), writers and artists such as Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams worked hard to return the character to his detective roots so that comic book fans, at least, took the character seriously again. The enormous mainstream success and attention garnered by *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* eliminated any vestiges of goofiness and silliness still surrounding the character in the wider popular consciousness. Miller's Batman reestablished the character and the Batman brand for DC comics. It largely dictated how the caped crusader was to be depicted in regular comics and in film for the following two decades and beyond.

The book's influence helped to start a number of trends in superhero comics. The first was in the form and manner of publication itself: specially formatted, self-contained worlds, "what-if" stories, and out-of-continuity limited series became increasingly popular. Beyond this, the conception of the superhero itself shifted. After *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, seemingly every superhero, in DC, Marvel, and independents alike, was made in the vein of Miller's Batman: dark and grim, tormented, even borderline psychopathic. One of Miller's main ideas—the transparency of the line between hero and villain—has become a well-established superhero theme, one that continues to preoccupy many comics.

FILMS

- *Batman*. Directed by Tim Burton. Warner Bros., 1989. The mainstream popularity of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* set the stage for this weird but mostly dark film built around the shared origins of Batman and the Joker. There were three sequels during the 1990's, each taking the character less seriously, moving him further away from any echo of *The Dark Knight Returns* and back into the camp of the 1960's television show.
- *Batman Begins*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros., 2005. Much like *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* did for the comics, this film revitalized Batman by approaching the hero and his world straightforwardly and realistically.
- *The Dark Knight*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros., 2008. Many of the themes (in particular, the exploration of the line between hero and villain) owe a great deal to *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, although Nolan is not as interested in satire as Miller was.

FURTHER READING

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