

Everything silly is serious again

Contributed by
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From comics, to television, to the big screen, the Caped Crusader is serious in 2005, but it hasn't always been that way.

(Rich Tenorio)

Walk into a comic book convention, and you might be immediately tempted to walk back out. You'll find yourself in a weird world, with people of all ages engaging in various types of indulgence. Often, this includes fantasies that heroes venerated on the page or in film are actually three-dimensional, tangible realities that they can encounter, or even become. To an outsider, this is silliness taken to the extreme. To an insider, this is serious freedom.

Last summer I went to one such convention, and as I walked around in bewilderment, my eyes finally settled on a young woman dressed from head to toe in a spandex body suit, tricked up to resemble the costume worn by Phoenix (a comic book character who once destroyed an entire universe). She had a gravely somber look on her face, which was appropriate, for Phoenix was about to meet her maker.

Chris Claremont, creator of the character Phoenix and a 30-year luminary in the comics business, was signing his work for awestruck fans. Phoenix was next in line. Claremont motioned for her to approach him, but she just stood there, shell-shocked. The absurdity was obvious — this girl wasn't even born when Claremont was in his prime, and it's a comic book for heaven's sake, and to top it all off, she's dressed like an ice skater without the skates. In another sense, this was her moment of epiphany. Her world's maker was bidding her to come, and such existential moments are hard to come by.

The phenomenon of this grave absurdity extends throughout the comic book universe, even to such comparatively local heroes like Gotham City-bound Batman. With the release of the first Batman film, the comic strip *Foxtrot* lampooned the seriousness with which comic book fans take their heroes: young Jason Fox and his friend, dressed in Batman costumes and hopped up on comic book trivia, were unwillingly chaperoned by Jason's brother to the movie's release. There, they criticized lapses in continuity and celebrated clever innovations in the Batman myth, all while the elder brother hid his head in shame. By the close of the film, however, the brother had been converted and had donned his own Batman costume, greeting Jason with the insanelly geeky — Hail, Bat-Brother!

A similar lunacy was on hand this summer as *Batman Begins* relaunched the character's film franchise. Started in 1989 as a gothically quirky spectacle, the character was fueled by his comic book history and director Tim Burton's imagination. Batman gradually evolved into a camp spectacle under the helm of replacement director Joel Schumacher, and with the release of 1997's *Batman and Robin* the franchise was declared dead. Good riddance, said fans, until rumors began rippling that a new movie would feature Christian Bale as star, and Christopher Nolan as director. This film was rumored to bear a closer resemblance to the spooky suspense film *Memento* than to *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and it would rival *Fantastic Four*, *Star Wars 3*, and *Spider-Man 2* in box office receipts. This was to be the film to resuscitate the dead character. Upon closer inspection, however, it's clear that Batman hasn't been dead, but he's simply been in the movie yet another cycle — one that begins in our seriousness, and ends (over and over again) in deliberate silliness.

Consider Batman's origin: A boy witnesses the murder of his parents. In a vision, he finds his calling in fighting crime, using fear as his principal weapon. He plans to bring justice to a community overrun with corruption — what's so funny about that? If you take the long view, the answer is — Plenty. This boy has become pudgy, corny, and ambiguously gay, at various points in his career. He has been joined by a Batgirl, a Boy Wonder, a Batmite and a butler. He has bottled Bat-Shark-Repellent and narrowly avoided being burned to death by a giant magnifying glass. How long can we tolerate such radical oscillation in one character, however iconic? How can we justify our long romance with such an unsettled enigma?

Putting the Goth in Gotham

Batman was the second major superhero to find a following in the comic book industry of the 1930s, providing a stark contrast to the bright, flashy optimism of his forebear, Superman. More influenced by film noir and crime novels than by science fiction, he found an immediate Depression-era audience. The early days of comic books met an undefined audience. Batman played to the middle, telling stories that appealed to soldiers, school children and traveling salesmen, and with Superman and other new entries he was soon selling millions of issues per month.

The primary audience was children, of course, and the publisher gambled that adding a child as a principal character

would cement customer loyalty. Robin, orphaned by organized crime, came under Batman's care and soon joined in his adventures. Though his origins were also tragic and dramatic, Robin's presence gave Batman a fatherly dimension that furthered his shift to the mainstream. Over time, particularly after the war, Batman and Robin were domesticated.

Too close for comfort

The domestic allure of the 1950s is well-documented, providing a monetary channel for post-war affluence and a means of repatriation for soldiers returning home and women exiting the workforce. The American image of the day was security, propriety and general bliss, providing nary a reason to leave the house. The comic book audience was fragmented, with readers attracted to gritty crime stories pilloried by parents desperate to shield their children from harmful influences. Superhero comics settled on an audience of children, which meant that their stories – most notably stories of the Batman – became sillier and simpler, with villains serving more as pranksters than as menaces to society.

The sillier Batman became, the more seriously he was scrutinized. As the 1950s progressed, perceived threats to domestic tranquility became matters of grave public concern. When Frederick Wertham published his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, a damning polemic on the harmful effects of comic reading, he scandalized his audience by reporting that some of his adolescent male clients reported homosexual wish dreams based on Batman and Robin.

Comics producers tried to silence the gay reading of Batman. New characters were added, including Batwoman and Batgirl, to suggest heterosexual love interests for both Batman and Robin. Nevertheless, the Wertham revelation signaled the beginning of what might well have been Batman's end – by 1965 the title was in grave danger of being canceled.

If you can't beat 'em ...

In 1966, however, ABC Television launched the Batman television show, airing twice weekly. Comic book sales surged to their highest levels, and Batman was revived. Rather than fight back against the stigma of silliness and subversion that had sunk the character so low, the television reveled in camp. Bizarre camera angles, outlandish colors and sets, ridiculous dilemmas, melodramatic language, and flamboyant acting made the show the centerpiece of pop television. The program won a devoted adult audience, with kids watching alongside the adults.

Interestingly enough, viewers who would have watched the show as children (myself included) recall not so much the silliness of the program as the sense of adventure that made each episode appointment television. Will Brooker, in his book *Batman Unmasked*, reflects on his childhood experience:

I didn't think it was funny when Batman announced that he'd resisted King Tut's hypnosis by reciting his times table backwards; I thought it was pretty impressive. . . . As an adult watching the series for this research, I found Batman divinely funny: but I can still very much remember what it was like to idolize the Caped Crusader. (pp. 197-98)

Brooker highlights the phenomenon of the dual audience – adult viewers reveling in the self-mocking humor of the series, set alongside young viewers seeing the full flash and spectacle of a hero in action. The same show that salvaged Batman as a character by lampooning him for adults thus, simultaneously, built a fiercely loyal fan base of young children by showcasing the character's life of adventure.

Return to the Dark Knight

The camp television show was cancelled after only a few seasons, ending Batman's romance with the mainstream. In the meantime, the comic book industry had been changing dramatically. Now appealing more centrally to a college-age audience, writing was geared toward issues that interested that demographic. Comic books were telling stories of racial tension, Cold War scenarios, illicit drug use, and cavalier sexuality. Now-adult fans interacted more directly with comics producers than ever before, and the consensus was that Batman is a serious character – not silly. The post-television Batman parted ways with Robin and focused in hard on the crime plaguing Gotham City. Writers Gardner Fox and Denny O'Neil, among others, emphasized Batman as the world's greatest detective, putting a lie to the TV series' Batman-gadabout and fueling two decades of serious storytelling.

Of course, Batman never really shed his TV image during this time. The 1960s series continued in reruns with its dual-audience formula, and Saturday morning cartoons of various stripes reinforced the image of Batman as a folksy patriarch, complete with Robin and the occasional magic bug named Batmite. Young viewers still took comfort in Batman's accessibility, and read adventure into the bright colors that characterized his television exploits. But with the

retrenchment of the comic book community as a cloistered set of writers and artists, the character's potential for somber storytelling was mined for all its worth.

Serious-Batman reached its apex with 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns*, by Frank Miller. Miller, who later would write the comics that eventually gave us another of this year's blockbusters, *Sin City*, took his inspiration as much from the crime-novel genre as from Batman's history and superhero conventions. Miller starts his fresh take on Batman by introducing us to Bruce Wayne toward the end of his life, as he struggles to retain his sanity, much less his relevance, in a world that has long since buried the Batman.

In his book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Geoff Klock highlights the "deliberate misreading" Miller applied to the comic icon: "Miller forces the world of Batman [in all its innate silliness] to make sense" (p. 29). Bruce Wayne has aged to a point never seen by any previous comics writer. Robin has been killed, at some point, but Batman has been pressed into another patriarchal role. This time, it's by a girl who speaks a barely recognizable English, and who wishes to take up the mantle of the "boy wonder." Batman's enemies are portrayed as having intimate knowledge of his psyche, and, ultimately, to be closer to him than that other iconic hero of comics history, Superman. The world that died to Batman 10 years prior has become a scary, scary place, and the only humor that enters the story is infused with irony, cynicism and defiance. Batman is not only serious, he is deadly serious.

Deadly seriousness ruled the day in comic writing, however. Alan Moore, who scripted the simultaneous blockbuster *The Watchmen* as an utter deconstruction of the superhero mythos, wrote about the new gothic home crafted for Miller's Batman:

Gotham City, a place which during the comic stories of the 1940s and 1950s seemed to be an extended urban playground stuffed with giant typewriters and other gargantuan props, becomes something much grimmer in Miller's hands. A dark and unfriendly city in decay, populated by rabid and sociopathic streetgangs, it comes to resemble more closely the urban masses which may very well exist in our own uncomfortably near future. . . . The values of the world we see are no longer defined in the clear, bright, primary colors of the conventional comic book but in . . . more subtle and ambiguous tones.

The Dark Knight Returns was met with immediate critical acclaim and consumer enthusiasm, and the Batman film that would launch the new franchise three years later would capitalize on Miller's brooding vision.

Overexposed

Four films and three Batmen later, the franchise had entirely abandoned Miller's take on the world of Batman. Gone was the dark, foreboding cityscape; in its place were skateboard ramps, double-entendres and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The cryptic Bruce Wayne portrayed by actor Michael Keaton had devolved into a lovable, bumbling patriarch played by George Clooney. In the meantime, another wildly successful cartoon had entered syndication, and although this animated Batman had some edge to him "no pupils in his eyes and a gruff, utilitarian voice" he was surrounded by the pranksters and silly supporting cast that had characterized stories in the 1950s.

Meanwhile, the grittiness that had entered comic-book storytelling through Miller had diffused from Batman into other storylines, and what had been unique to Batman quickly came to characterize the industry. Specialty shops became lone sanctuaries for proponents of that industry, and comic book readers became laughing stocks in the eyes of the mainstream. The star-studded comedy *Mystery Men* lampooned not just Batman, but superheroes in general. More broadly, the film mocked the obsession that overtakes fans of superheroes. The capacity for mainstream popular culture to take superheroes seriously had reached its limit, and only fanatics were left to embrace the darker side of Batman and his peers.

Isolating serious readers of comic books in quarantine, however, ultimately incubated some profound storytelling opportunities, enabling a renaissance of the genre, and launching the cycle all over again.

If I don't laugh I'll cry

Today's Batman, in film, on television, and in print, is typically dour, obsessive, efficient and generally unfriendly. He remains so focused on his mission "to combat crime and seek the welfare of his city" that he remains isolated even from those closest to him. He has, as such, become a bit of a laughing stock to other superheroes. Kevin Smith's 2002 *Green Arrow: Quiver* features just one of many such interactions:

"With all due respect, Bats . . . anyone ever tell you you're a weird guy?"
 "You're here to observe, Stephanie. Not to make observations."

â€œI know, but câ€™monâ€”you find a friend who everyone thought was dead, and instead of throwing him a â€”welcome home ... or even a â€”Holy Moley! Youâ€™re alive!â€” party ... you knock him out, x-ray every bone in his body, and give him multiple scans. Or do we call â€”em â€”bat-scansâ€” down here?â€”

Hyperseriousness in any situation, after all, is itself rather silly. And, in a sense, itâ€™s a little sad as well. Teenaged Robin suffers from Batmanâ€™s seriousness as heâ€™s forced to be an ever-vigilant soldier while his friends get to play at recess. Neal Gaiman, author of the acclaimed Sandman series, and no stranger to serious storytelling in the comic format, lamented the loss of Batmanâ€™s playfulness using the Riddlerâ€™s voice in 1995â€™s â€œWhen Is a Doorâ€”:

It was fun in the old days. ... We hung out together, down at the â€œWhat A Way to Go-Go.â€” It was great! ... You know what they call them now? Camp, kitsch, corny ... Well, I loved them â€” they were part of my childhood.

In response, the genre has expanded the principle of the dual audience to a triple audience. The young are courted through animation, merchandising and age-specific stories and formatting; the adult fanatics are honored with deliberate misreadings of characters in a variety of formats (such as Brian Augustynâ€™s Gotham by Gaslight, placing Batman in the historical context of Jack the Ripper); and the adult mainstream is guaranteed a laugh, with winks of self-referential humor and with storytelling that acknowledges the silliness of simply being human.

So, for example, the X-Men are represented in toy stores and on the Cartoon Network, theyâ€™re reconceived by postmodern storytelling juggernaut Joss Whedon, and they mock themselves in film with jokes about spandex and code names. Films that fail to acknowledge this triple reading, such as 2004â€™s The Punisher and 2005â€™s Elektra, are given negative reviews by fanatics and perform poorly at the box office.

Batman Begins offers psychological complexity to the adults, reverent treatment of characters to the fanboys, and lots of toys for the kids. Batman, more so than Superman or any other character, continues to cover the complete spectrum, from silly to serious, with astonishing effectiveness. Moviegoers feel no compunction laughing at the souped-up Batmobile mere moments after weeping for a traumatized young boy.

The fact of the matter is, stories about superheroes, much like stories about all of us, can hardly avoid a simultaneous mix of seriousness and silliness. Fundamentally, after all, stories about superheroes are merely supercharged stories about us. The agony these heroes feel over the wrongs done to them may, from an objective distance, be clearly overdone, but with a sympathetic viewing they can be seen as true expressions of how people struggle through whatever life theyâ€™ve been given. With a clear head, we can laugh at ourselves for the ways that we react to others, and yet, we can remove ourselves from our own lives for only so long before we have to deal again with the agony as we experience it. Our pain would be silly if it werenâ€™t so sad.

Authors have clearer sight than their characters â€” they can see the absurdity and the agony all at once. Authors who have told the stories of Batman and his contemporaries have chosen to emphasize either silliness or seriousness, but virtually no Batman tragedy is told entirely without humor, and virtually no Batman comedy is told entirely without the subtle weight of pain. We can sympathize with Batman even as weâ€™re tempted to laugh, because life itself is such a subtle mixture of tragedy and comedy that we donâ€™t always know whether to laugh or cry. And there â€” somewhere between the tragedy and the comedy of it all â€” lies the truth.

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