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ARTICLE CHANGE

Batman and me

By
Danny Smith

I don't remember when I first encountered Batman, he's always just been there; like McDonald's or Jesus. One of those permanent features in the cultural landscape with which to orientate myself. I suppose whether you like him is not really relevant, like a family member his continual presence makes it a matter of having to negotiate a relationship.

The first Batman I encountered must have been the '60s tv version, high camp played for laughs with such utter sincerity it was hard for me to see the tongue in the cheek. As I got older it just seemed a bit, well, shit. Actually worse than shit: disappointing. The character was really interesting and by the time I was nine or ten I was able to get my hands on some of the comics, it was just really frustrating to have a TV show of my favourite comic book character and it be garish and childlike. I was embarrassed for him. The TV show did set a precedent: all the villains we're accomplished actors in their own right that turn in massive performances.

Up to that point the comics I had got of were mostly Golden Age DC promotional cash-ins like the Super Dictionary, which I found at a jumble sale, or annuals grubbed from charity shops featuring Silver Age Batman. Silver Age refers to a period of comics where Batman started to take a more serious tone. After playing the vigilante-as-hero narrative out in the Golden Age, the stories took a more playful, science fiction tone and saw Batman regularly go into space, or miniaturise himself, or fight alien crime bosses. This calmed down and the tone

of the stories changed from fantasy to wish-fulfilment, Batman became master of all the martial arts and saw him jetting off to exotic locations and meeting beautiful women. One image of him sword fighting in the desert topless apart from the the cowl and cape, hairy chest rampant comes to mind.

And this reflected who I was, by now I was ten or 11, and an intense young man who was bored by most other kids presence. Being the eldest child and first of a new generation in a large family I longed to be considered 'adult'. One school report noted 'Daniel prefers the company of adults to children and certainly has the sense of humour to match'. This adult escapism appealed and also gave me a sense of ownership when the Tim Burton film started its massive marketing machine. Suddenly Batman was everywhere: the symbol not necessarily shined into the night sky, but plastered onto every sticker book, lunch box, geegaw and nick nack. The wait was excruciating, in my mind it really wasn't fair. Batman was mine and everyone got to see it before me. Americans first, then people at the cinema (I wasn't old enough for the newly created 12 certificate) then I had to wait nearly a year for it to come out on VHS.

When it did I was so excited, my best friend Nicky was going to have a 'video party' for his birthday. This seemed to be a big thing back then, cool enough for us to refer to them as 'VP's' (or me with my dyslexic brain 'VD's', until somebody took me to one side and told me what VD was - in the broadest terms possible). I talked Nicky into watching Batman for his party but I was tasked to get it from the video shop. I had to get my Nan to meet me at the video shop

because the 12 certificate hadn't been passed for VHS yet. At the same time I was asked to get a film to watch afterwards, I chanced my arm that Nan wouldn't check and just hire whatever I gave her. I remember watching Batman in Nicky's living room rapt, my Batman, a dark Batman, an adult Batman. Looking back now the film has major structural problems and is in many ways as cartoonish as the '60s TV show. A few days later my mom and Nicky's started getting complaints about their kids having nightmares, at first it was they thought it was the dark tone of the Batman film, but then it was filtered back about the scene with a dismembered head on a tray and I had to admit the second film we watched that day was the schlock horror classic Re-Animator 2.

Later that year I started senior school. Losing the safe warm confines of junior school would turn me from an isolated but friendly kid into an isolated and spiky proto-teen. I went to a different senior school to my junior school friends and forced myself to assimilate. I quickly learnt that it was very uncool to be excited about anything, let alone comics. So I wore the detached cool I mimicked off the older kids like a mask. Bruce Wayne in the day, while at night I was swinging from the roof tops with Batman.

The second film came out in '92 and I was deflated. The film is a real departure from a comic book: darker and more twisted, less real, and somehow dirtier. Looking back it's actually one of the strongest Batman films, the tone is different to the comics, yes, but the characters are strong enough to carry it. It's also one of the few Batman films in which the main characters do not draw from the

performances of the TV series. Danny DeVito's penguin compared to Buster Meredith's turn is truly grotesque and uncanny, and Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman is a wonderful mix of incredibly sexual and heartbreakingly broken compared the one note 'sexy villain' from both Julie Newmar and Eartha Kitt. And the film is better for it. It's odd to think that the heavily-stylised nature, not to mention the rocket launcher penguins, put me off the film at the time, dismissing it as kids' stuff. But at the same time McDonald's were having real problems sponsoring the film because of how dark it was — wondering how the hell they were going to make toys from a sideshow penguin that leaks black slime and a brain damaged secretary dressed in fetish gear.

In my early teens one of the aspects that I really respected about Batman, and something I still think is an unspoken attraction to the character for many people to this day, is as opposed to the other superheroes, his will. His agency in going out and becoming the person he needed to be. He didn't happen upon superpowers by lab accident or by birth. He chose and suffered and learnt and trained. His lack of superpowers is his greatest strength. I wasn't comfortable at the start of senior school, shy but sharp, smart but not great at school work. I found it hard to make friends, so I did what any bookish kid would do: I went to the library and read every book I could find. Books about overcoming shyness, making friends, neuro linguistic programming and social hacking.

Around the same time I had managed to get hold of some of the DC Batman comics, as well as a bunch of Superman comics, mostly a story where he loses

his powers after some kryptonite or other. I remember one Batman comic in particular, Batman Vol 1 #457 it's the first official appearance of Tim Drake (the third Robin). The art is wonderfully dark and the story is the whole Batman story re-told through nightmarish flashback including the death of Batman's parents and a brutal flashback of the second Robin being beaten to death with a crowbar. It was enough to make me see the adult worth of comics in a time where mainstream culture was getting bored. The issue also starts with Oscar Wilde quote "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." This really resonated with me as the person I was becoming at school, using the skills to make friends I'd learnt from books, split from who I thought I really was.

Around this time the animated series started airing on the television I watched it occasionally, when no one was watching me. I remember it being a clever take - the heavily stylised art deco feel - but it was still a cartoon, and I was far too adult for that sort of thing. One notable exception that does stick out in my mind is the genuinely moving Heart of Ice episode which explains the tragic motivation of the otherwise-forgotten villain Mr Freeze so tenderly and with such humanity it's now recognised as cannon in the comic universe. I've been assured by other Batman fans that the series are well worth checking out again and any discussion of 'best Batmans' inevitably has a section shouting for the voice of Kevin Conroy.

And during the end of school I was distancing myself from even the comics.

Apparently this is completely normal, around the mid to late teens everybody goes through a phase of not being that interested in comics. As my school didn't have a sixth-form attached to it I had to go another school that did, once again losing a large section of my friends. Not even book tricks and a superior charm offensive worked: the closed ranks and petty rivalry meant I struggled to make friends. At the time my dyslexia was undiagnosed, so spent the lessons struggling and break times alone. I stopped going. Instead of telling my parents I had dropped out, every morning I would get ready and leave on time, even catching the same bus in case I was seen. But, instead of going into school, I would stay on the bus and ride it to the city centre taking refuge in the central library. Around that time in comics there was an invasion of British authors braking into the American comic scene, writers like Alan Moore, Warren Ellis, and Garth Ennis who had first bloodied themselves in the battlefield of british SF comics and underground zines. They bought darker more real sensibilities to these American icons. Titles like Sandman by Neil Gaiman and the sublime Arkham Asylum by Grant Morrison were wildly popular.

Arkham Asylum is one of the first graphic novels to address Batman's compulsion as a mental illness, a sophisticated form of PTSD and this take positions Batman away from his money being the superpower to his will being the thing that separates him from everyone else. For a year, everyday, I went to the central library and read all the graphic novels. Having slipped through the gaps of the education system so thoroughly I knew I wouldn't be able to get

back in unless I did something about it. I applied to a different college, faked my parents signatures, and doctored some of the recommendations I left school with. Next September starting A-levels somewhere else.

The Batman marketing machine churned again for Schumacher's Batman Forever, which I rewatched for this article. It's a little redundant to say how bad this film is, but, it really is. It reads in exactly the same way as the TV series. Everybody is aware of how ridiculous the concept is, except Schumacher who is running around the set smacking the tongue out of everybodies cheek. Jim Carrey runs around being Ace Ventura crossed with Robin Williams, a performance that lands just short of Frank Gershwin's giggling portrayal, and Tommy Lee Jones does nothing to contain his disgust at the whole project while leaning so much on Jack Nicholson's Joker it actually tarnishes the first film. Val Kilmer keeps a straight face while pretending to struggle with riddles a four year old could answer and Chris o'Connell pretends to be a teenager.

Two years later Batman and Robin cames out, this time it's a film fully aware of how bad it actually is. It heavily references the animated Heart of Ice episode while bleeding all the pathos out of it. Everybody in that movie knows they're making a drinking game, the charming half-smile of George Clooney becomes a smug, knowing nod to the audience.

As the general public fall out of love with Batman, so do I. In my late teens and early twenties I finally became comfortable in my own skin. I didn't need

superhero escapism, I had hedonism. I barely noticed when Batman Begins came out. When I do see it I shrug, it's okay. Not *my* Batman.

I'm finally comfortable with Batman being unfilmable. Everybody has an opinion on what the filmmaker has got right or wrong about Batman. As if there is a platonic ideal of Batman that everybody is reaching for. This is because Batman is a prism, you see the aspect what you need from him. Film is too permanent, too far reaching and immovable, to provide the wiggle-room to negotiate the reading you need.

There have been two more Batman films since then. The Dark Knight is a terrible movie, much worse than people give it credit for because of Heath Ledger's wonderful portrayal of the Joker. And a third that I didn't even bother to see. Not only at this point had I washed my hands of Batman on screen. I've become deeply suspicious of Batman as a character. Over the last five or six years I began to work with kids that had been expelled from school, kids with severe emotional or behavioural problems, Kids that, sometimes, had been dragged into gangs through family or circumstance, and kids that had been perpetrators of violent crime. These kids were often from backgrounds of neglect or abuse. Kids that would be punched in the face by the billionaire Bruce Wayne. I saw how severe underfunding of youth services lead to violent crime and understood that there are better ways for billionaires to fight crime than breaking poor peoples legs with grim-faced abandon.

I don't think its a coincidence that I started feeling the way I do around the age that I couldn't get to be Batman. E. Paul Zehr, in his book Becoming Batman, hypothesised that it would take about 15 - 18 years of training to gain the abilities and physique required to be Batman, but he should actually retire around 55. This would mean if I started training now I would have to retire at the time I finish training. So this shift in perception about Batman could be because we all think we *could* be him, given the right motivation. Batman is the superhero with no powers, it's that possibility that makes him so enduring. When we say 'Batman is bad ass' what were really adding in our head is '…and so could I' be': he's not a remote possibility, he's more real. He is the person we know we could be, a stand in for all the what ifs, a person we know we could be at the end of all our new year's resolutions and determined 'never agains'.

We need Batman. Most of us need a reason to get up sometimes. Batman is the saint of cities, of aspirations and doing the right thing despite what we are told. He is human will and ingenuity: beating everything from sons of Krypton to the daughters of gods. Most of his villains are mentally ill, this is not a an accident. Batman is the manifestation being able to overcome our mind's weaknesses and achieve anything we dream. And in this aspect Batman once again lives in my head, not as an Ayn Rand bully, but an icon and hero.

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About the writer

*"My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order."
Danny's work has appeared in Vice, Fused and Area magazines. He typically writes about
culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He's
worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold
encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New
Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a
pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.*

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