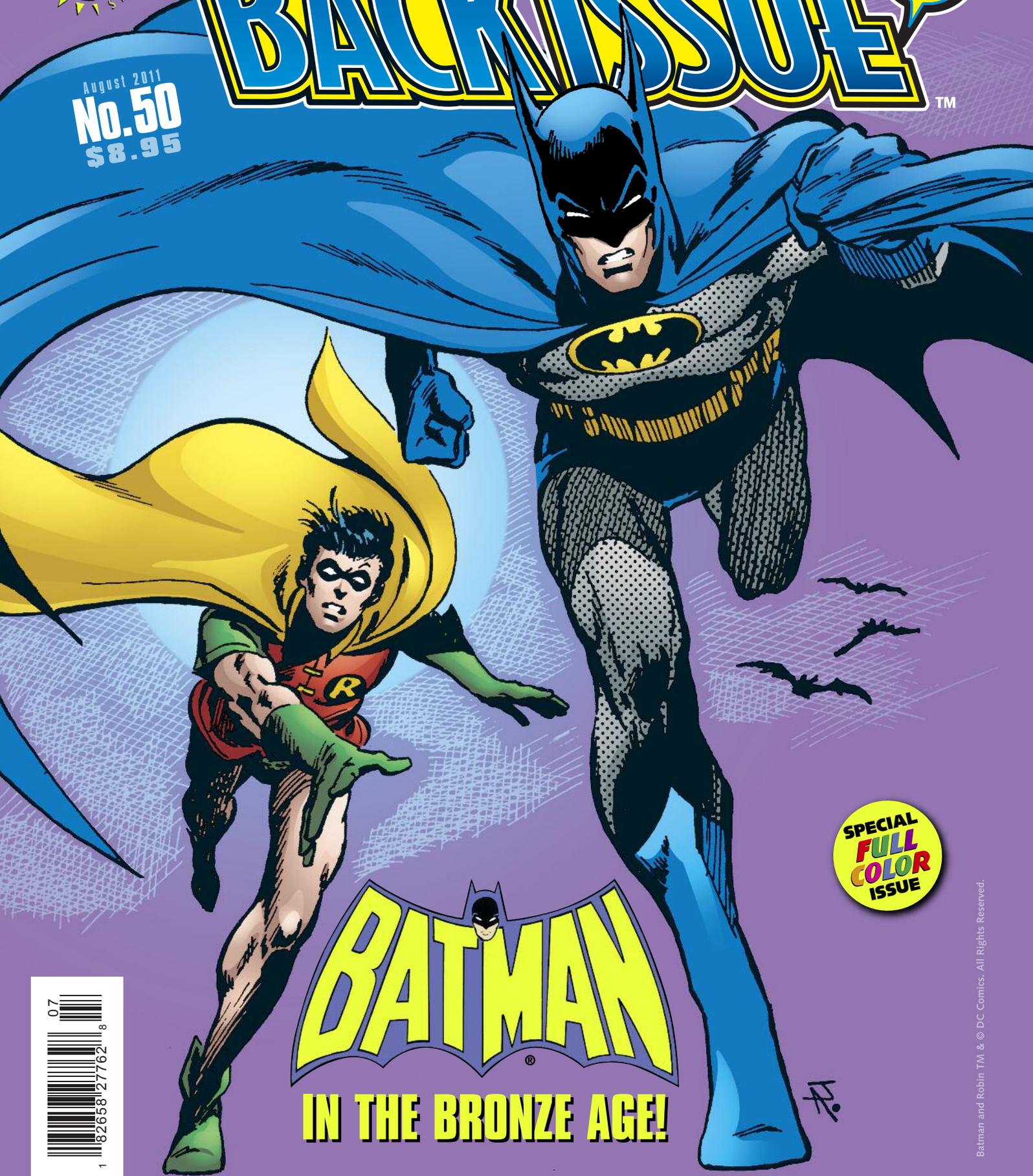


"PRO2PRO" WITH O'NEIL, ADAMS, and LEVITZ • BATMAN FAMILY • JOKER'S DAUGHTER
BATMAN'S UNSUNG CREATORS • IN PRAISE OF JIM APARO • NOCTURNA • DARK KNIGHT and MORE!



BACKISSUE!

August 2011
No. 50
\$8.95



**SPECIAL
FULL
COLOR
ISSUE**

BATMAN

IN THE BRONZE AGE!



Volume 1,
Number 50
August 2011

**Celebrating
the Best
Comics of
the '70s,
'80s, and Beyond!**

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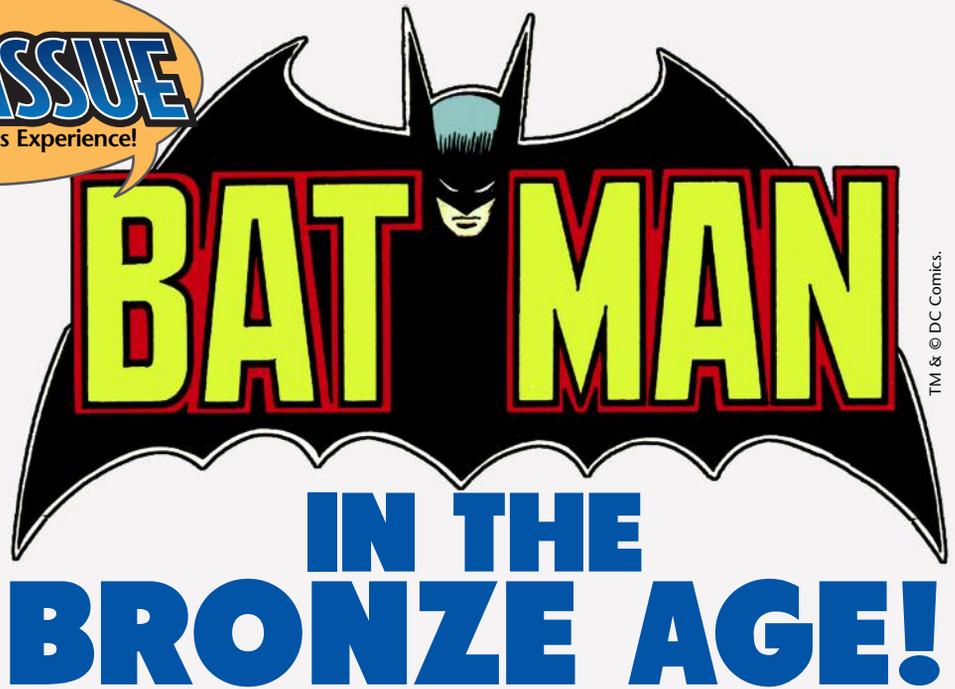
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BACKISSUE

The Retro Comics Experience!



BATMAN
**IN THE
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Art by Bernie Wrightson. Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions.



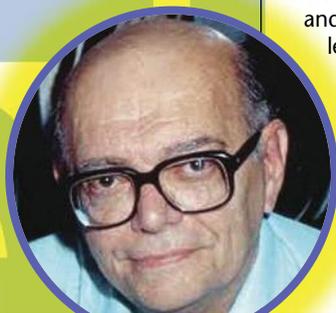
BACK seat driver IN PRAISE OF JIM APARO



Unusual Ally, Exceptional Artist

Jim Aparo guest-stars with Batman! Detail from the cover of *The Brave and the Bold* #124 (Jan. 1976).

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JIM APARO

Jim Aparo (1932–2005) could have been a comic-book rock star.

In his prime—the early to mid-1970s—this triple-threat (penciler/inker/letterer) artist was certainly talented enough. Aparo's layouts were crisp and exciting, and his storytelling clear and concise. His sound-effect lettering symbiotically empowered his art, making his depictions of gunfire and explosions almost audible. And in the Bronze Age, his Batman was second only to Neal Adams'.

Jim Aparo would have made an unlikely rock star, though. If you had met him on the street, you might've thought he was an accountant. Or a minister. Or your dad. Bald (I've never seen a photo of Aparo with hair) with bug-eyed spectacles and a wiry, Barney Fife physique, Mr. Aparo was an unassuming figure, the kind of guy that Batman would have to rescue.

Aparo, while working as an advertising artist, got his start in comics on a short-lived, mid-1960s, Connecticut-published newspaper strip titled *Stern Wheeler* (collected into a 1986 one-shot by Spotlight

Comics). He then migrated to Charlton Comics and drew everything from humor ("Miss Bikini Luv" in *Go-Go Comics*, his first Charlton job) to adventure (*The Phantom*, which we explored in *BACK ISSUE* #47). When Charlton editor Dick Giordano jumped ship to DC Comics in the late '60s, he brought Aparo with him, assigning him to *Aquaman*. It was there that I, as an elementary school-aged comics reader, first encountered Aparo's art, on *Aquaman's* celebrated "Search for Mera" storyline that began in issue #40. Since Aparo was, initially, aping the previous illustrator on *Aquaman*, Nick Cardy (who remained on board as cover artist), his art didn't stand out in my young mind...

...until a few years later, when I read the Batman/Phantom Stranger team-up in *The Brave and the Bold* #98 (Oct.–Nov. 1971).

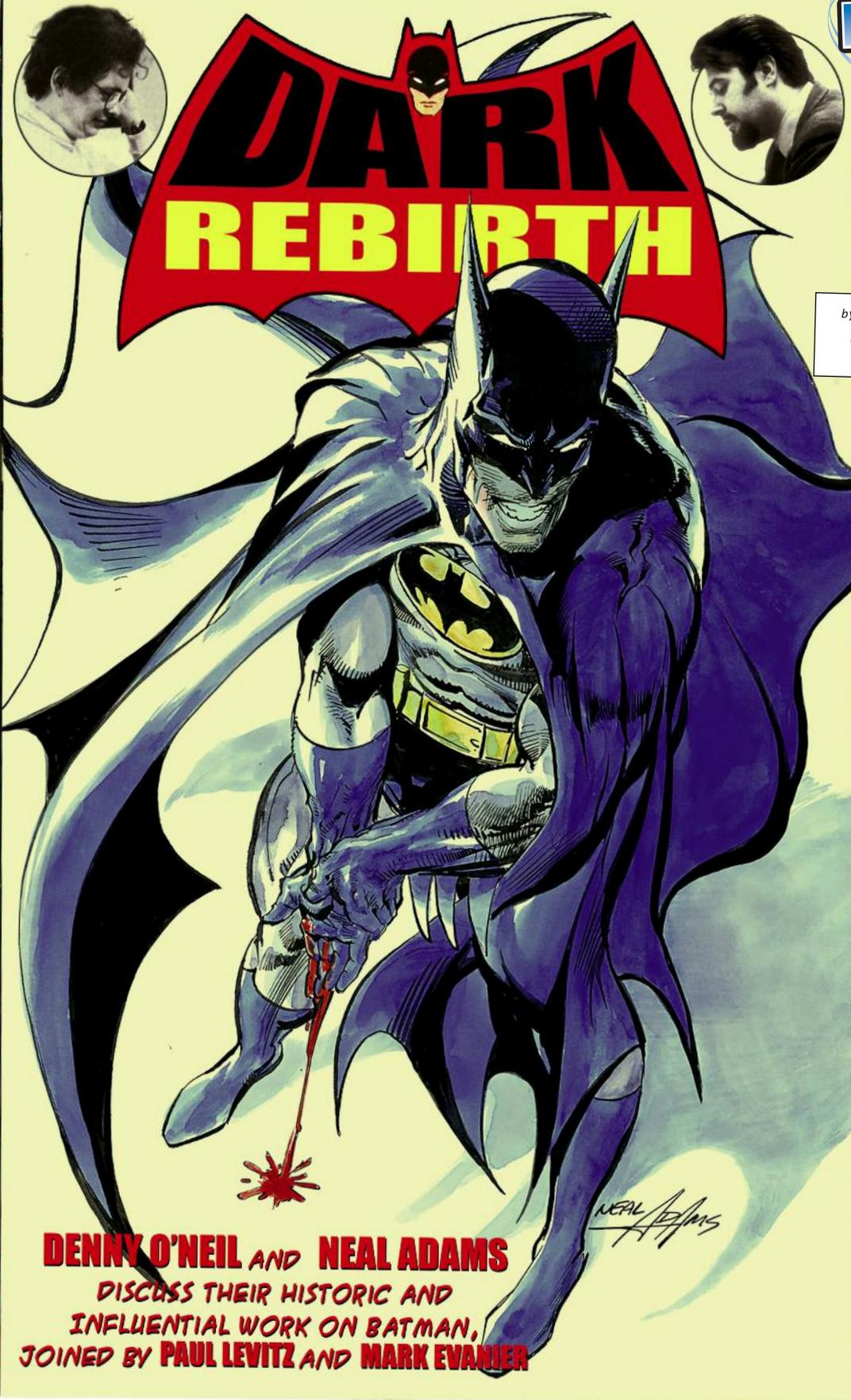
Aparo's Batman debut was nestled, like his *Aquaman* art, under the wing of the fabulous Nick Cardy. Cardy's cover to *B&B* #98 featured an unconscious Caped Crusader on a sacrificial table, with a voluptuous vixen commanding to a knife-wielding shadowy figure, "Now come forth... *kill the godfather!*" (This cover latched onto



BIGGER AND BETTER 25¢

DC BATMAN

BIGGER AND BETTER 25¢



by **Mark DiFruscio**
(audio recorded on July 24, 2010
and edited for publication)

The Brave and the Bold

Special thanks to *BACK ISSUE's* dynamic designer, Rich Fowlks, for assembling this mock DC cover saluting the men who returned Batman to his gothic roots, writer Denny O'Neil and artist Neal Adams (working under the direction of editor Julie Schwartz). The art was produced by Adams for a MOCCA Benefit Auction and later auctioned in 2005 by Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

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DENNY O'NEIL AND NEAL ADAMS
DISCUSS THEIR HISTORIC AND
INFLUENTIAL WORK ON BATMAN,
JOINED BY PAUL LEVITZ AND MARK EVANIER



Batmen Forever
 (top) Our Pro2Pro fantastic four. Photo courtesy of Mark DiFruscio. (bottom left) Adams' first cover for the title *Batman* was on issue #200 (Mar. 1968). (bottom right) An Adams Batman sketch from 1982, courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

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*Fairly or unfairly, the publication of both *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 has become synonymous with the dawn of the so-called "Dark Age" of comics: a period typified by "grim and gritty" stories and increasingly violent characters, inhabiting a darker, more psychologically complex world. Yet a deeper examination of comic-book history suggests that these works should be viewed less as a fixed point of origin for the "Dark Age" than the apotheosis of a broader evolution within the medium—an evolution that locates its true origins not with creators Alan Moore and Frank Miller in the 1980s, but with writer **Denny O'Neil** and artist **Neal Adams** in the 1970s, when the duo revolutionized the character of Batman, as well as the comics industry, during their highly acclaimed collaboration. In July of 2010, this legendary creative team took center stage at the San Diego Comic-Con for a spirited and candid conversation about their classic work, headlining the panel "Taking Back the Knight: Batman in the 1970s and Beyond," alongside former DC president **Paul Levitz** and moderator **Mark Evanier**.*

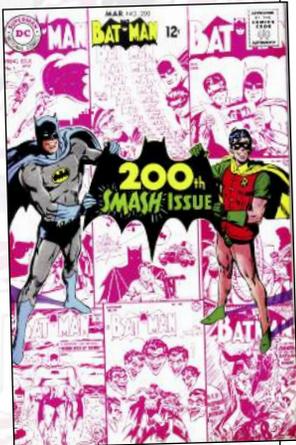
— Mark DiFruscio

MARK EVANIER: *Let me ask each of you, as a kickoff question: What was your first exposure to Batman that made you feel strongly about the character? Which era of Batman, which body of Batman material, was the one that made you like the character or care about the character the most? Was there some period of Batman, some era, some way he was drawn, some way he was written, that meant a lot to you? Paul?*

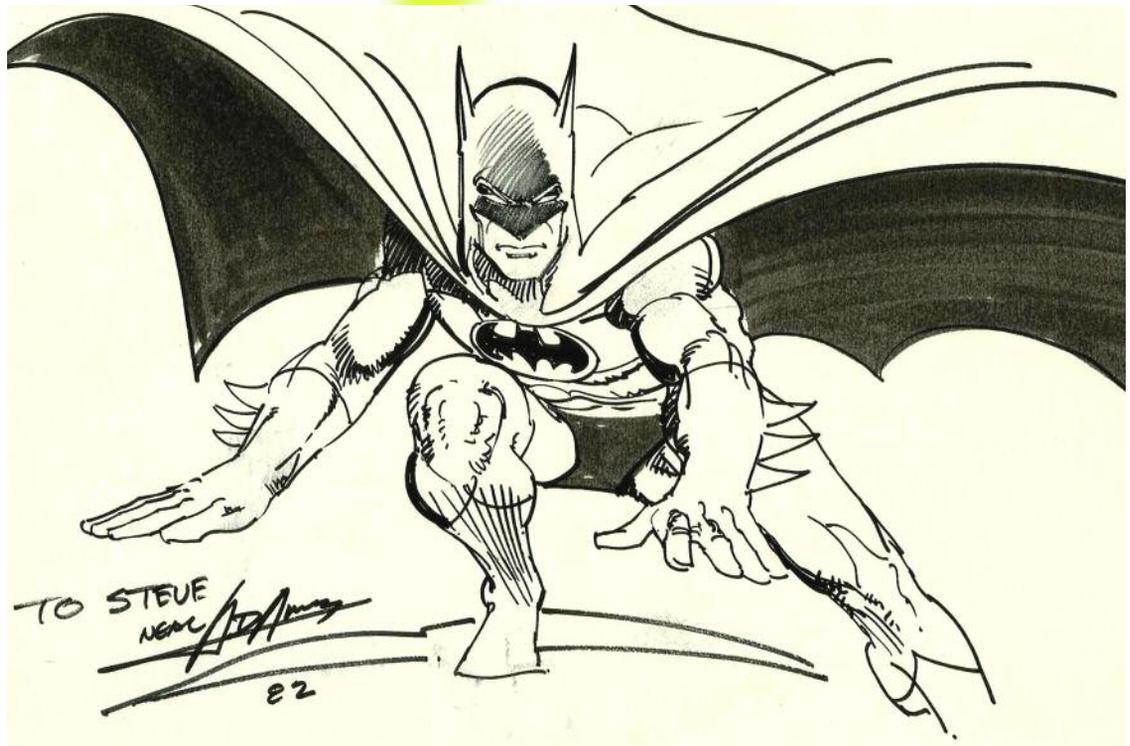
PAUL LEVITZ: I came into Batman through the comics that were in an older kid's box, down the block. And it was probably the last awful moments of Jack Schiff's editorial run. But through whatever accident... they were the real interesting moments of that. It was "Robin Dies at Dawn" [*Batman* #156, June 1963] which was one of the most powerful stories from that period. And Dr. No-Face ["The Fantastic Dr. No-Face," *Detective Comics* #319, Sept. 1963]. False Face ["The Menace of False Face," *Batman* #113, Feb. 1958]. Maybe I just remember them fondly because I was six years old, but a lot of my interest was due to Dick Sprang. [Sprang] was one of the truly great artists working on Batman in the early years. And *that* was the imprinting.



PAUL LEVITZ



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And then, all of a sudden, [editor Julius Schwartz'] stuff started coming out a year or two later. And it was just so beautiful and so different. I'm a Superman kid, not a Batman kid at heart. So it didn't carry the same power for me that [Superman editor] Mort Weisinger's books did at the same moment. But it was clearly just a more sophisticated thing.

And then I probably next noticed Batman when he was about to show up on TV, and all of that silliness. Kind of surviving through that.

And I turn around and *these* guys are doing it [gesturing to O'Neil and Adams], and it's like, "What the f***?! This is cool! Where did *this* come from?" [laughter]

EVANIER: *It struck me that a lot of fans, when they saw Denny and Neal do Batman, said, "Ah, Batman is finally being done right!" But they had never seen it done right before. They just knew that was the way it was supposed to be, without having seen it ever properly done. Denny, what was your first exposure to Batman?*

DENNY O'NEIL: Oh, wow, that was about 65 years ago. My memories are cloudy. I was a comic-book reader as a kid, and among my earliest memories are *Superman* and *Batman*, funnybooks that my father had bought me after Sunday Mass. I remember being puzzled by Batman because he can't fly and yet he has a cape. And he was just somehow a little more interesting. I remember when I was an avid listener to the *Superman* radio show. And once a year Clark Kent, or Superman, left Metropolis or Earth or whatever, and Batman pinch-hit for him. I anticipated those—I was really caught up by the Batman episodes.

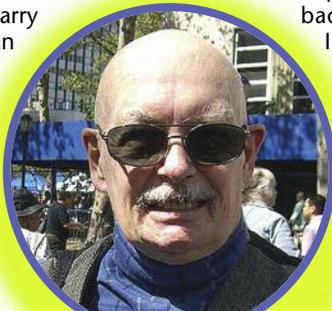
As far as, cut to me being a professional writer a few years later—you hear in writing classes, "Write what you know." Well, I swear to you all, I have never waited on a rooftop at 3:00 A.M. for a homicidal maniac to show up. But in terms of what we do, it's, "Write what

your fantasies are." I have never had a fantasy of omnipotence. Really, no kidding. And Superman is a god, for all practical purposes. At least as interpreted back then. But Batman was believable.

I could fantasize about being Batman without sort of straining my imagination.

And for reasons that only a very competent psychotherapist could probably discover, I've always been drawn to *noir-ish* stories. I love Raymond Chandler, for example. When I finally got belatedly exposed to *The Shadow*, [writer] Bill Finger's major influence in [co-]creating Batman, I responded to those. But Batman was as close as we could come to *noir* in superheroes.

And finally I read an essay by the great Alfred Bester—who had once been a comic-book writer and became arguably the best science-fiction writer of the 20th century—about the joys of writing

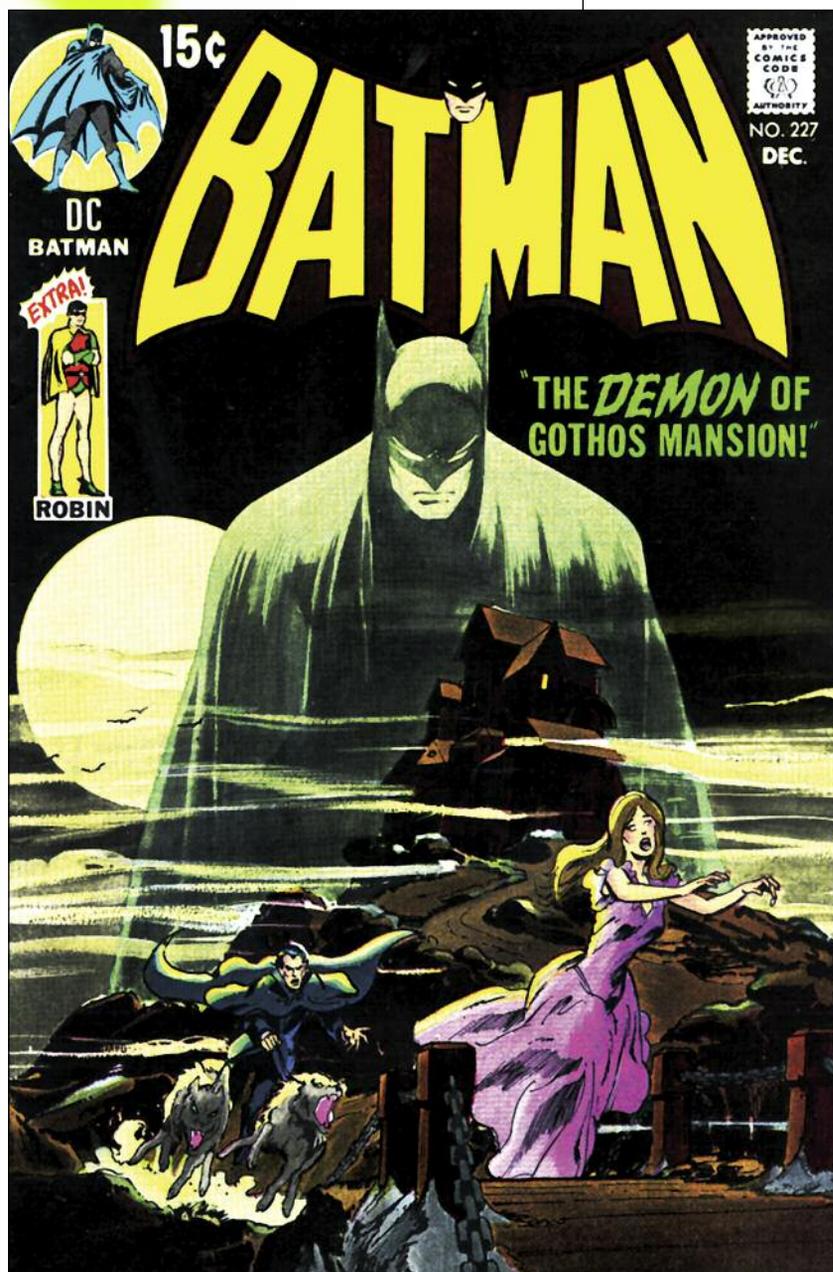
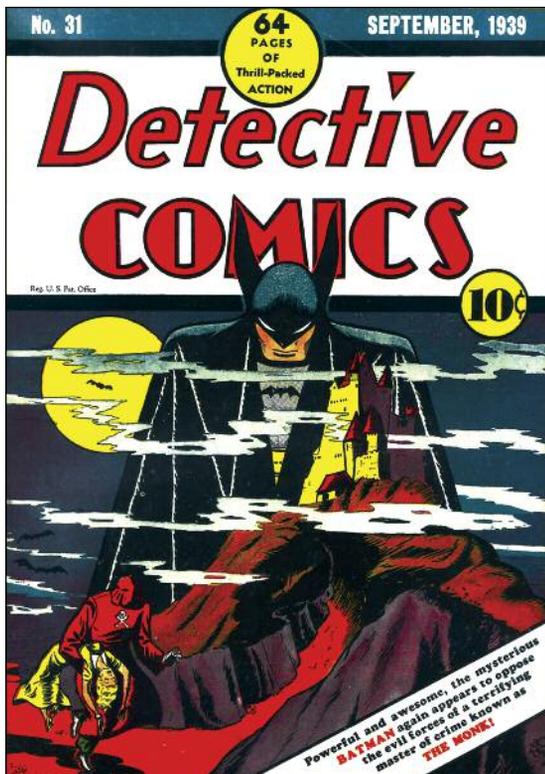


DENNY O'NEIL

Haunting Homage

Adams paid tribute to the Bob Kane/Jerry Robinson cover of (left) *Detective* #31 (Sept. 1939) with his moody cover to (right) *Batman* #227 (Dec. 1970).

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**Batman
(by O'Neil and
Adams) Begins**

(left) *Detective Comics* #395 (Jan. 1970), home of Denny and Neal's first Batman collaboration, "The Secret of the Waiting Graves."
(right) *Detective Comics* #404, a tribute to Joe Kubert's *Enemy Ace*.

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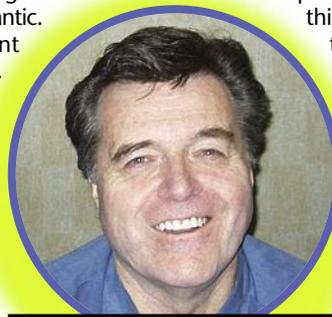
obsessed characters. And that was the last piece of the puzzle for me. As a writer I realized, "Yeah, this is what Batman is about," and "Wow, can I have a good time with this!" And I did.

EVANIER: Neal, what was your first exposure to Batman?

NEAL ADAMS: As a kid I was a comic-book reader. And I didn't necessarily recognize the difference between one artist and another until Dick Sprang came along. And then everything became gigantic. And Batman bounced around on giant typewriters and other sexy objects. [laughter] But before that, I enjoyed Batman because of Jerry Robinson. I didn't know at the time that Jerry Robinson had sort of created Robin. And Robin was this great kid, and was always doing things that Batman didn't like. And he did it to the extent that they gave him a comic book for a while, I think.

LEVITZ: *Star-Spangled* [Comics].

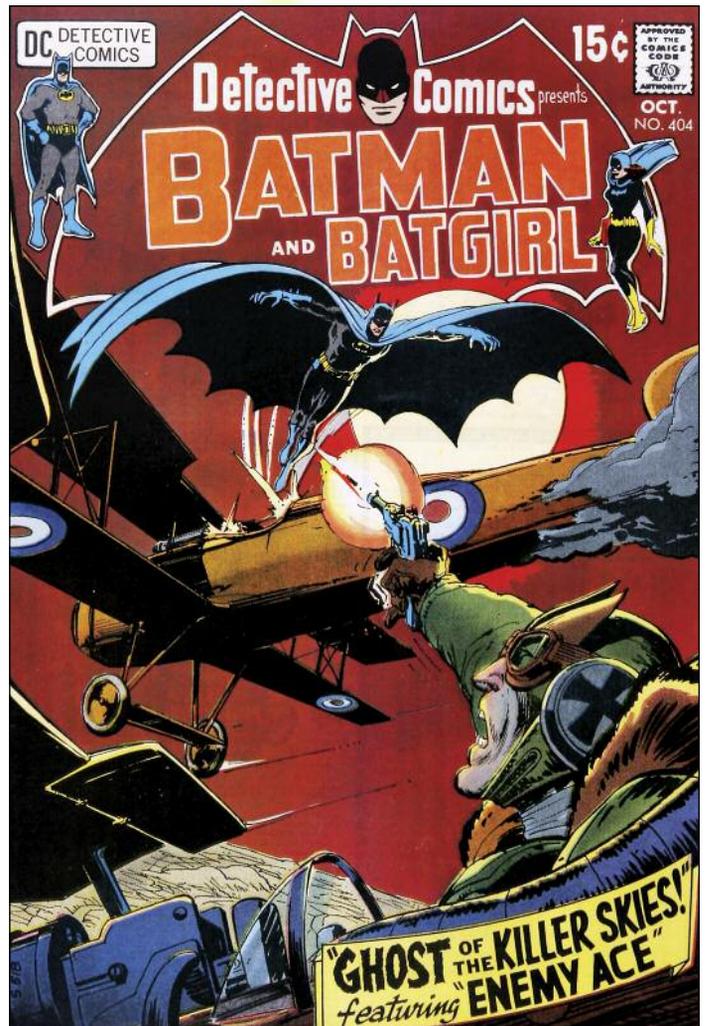
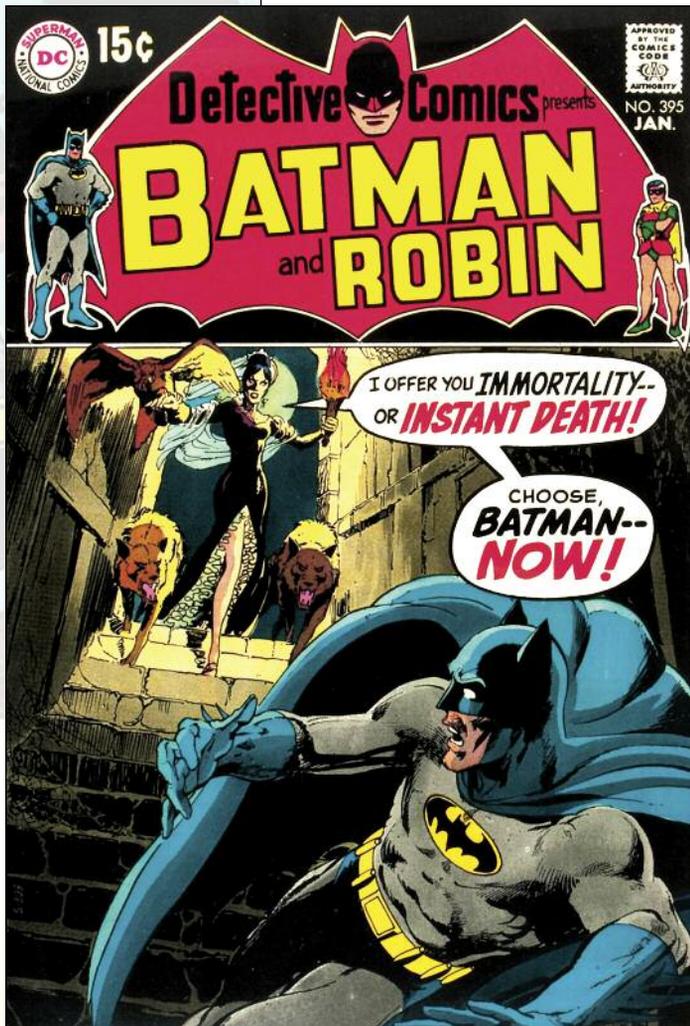
ADAMS: Right. And Robin was just this bouncy, joyful, get-in-trouble kid. And Batman was the serious adult. And I never thought of him that way before, but I guess he was. Very serious. So I enjoyed the Jerry Robinson era. I enjoyed the Bob Kane era, which was drawn incredibly badly. And the Dick Sprang era, which was drawn incredibly well. And he came up with these wonderful things, which obviously he was fed by the scripts.



NEAL ADAMS

Then, as a kid, and army brat, I was sent to Germany with my family. We spent two years in Germany. And when I came back, everything in comics had changed. Everything was calmed and quieted down, because of, apparently, this Fredric Wertham jerk who wrote a book called *Seduction of the Innocent* and just drove a torpedo through all of comics. And you wouldn't think that the response in *Batman* would be the same kind of thing. But... everybody was afraid during that time. As a comic-book reader I could no longer get *MAD* comics, I couldn't get *Psychiatry*, I couldn't get *M.D.*, I couldn't get *Piracy*, I couldn't get *Monster-Horror-Crashing-Bashing* whatever the hell it was when I was younger. Two years away, and America had changed. And everything was calmed down. I had to wait for *MAD* comic books to turn into *MAD Magazine*. And I didn't really pay too much attention to comic books because they weren't fun anymore: *Mr. District Attorney*, *My Greatest Adventure*, *Pat Boone* comics. Really awful. [laughter]

So the best I could do was read the Army comics that Joe Kubert and Russ Heath did. And every once in a while Mort Drucker, who then went to *MAD Magazine*. I would casually read the Batman story, casually read the Superman story. And watch Curt Swan evolve as a good artist. And watch Batman and



BAT MAN™ IN...

“THE MYSTERY OF MEN WITH UNSUNG LEGACIES!”

WRITER DAVID V. REED AND ARTISTS ERNIE CHUA AND JOHN CALNAN COME UP SHAMEFULLY SHORT IN THE HISTORY OF BATMAN CHRONICLERS

by Jim Kingman



There is an unarguable consensus among Batmaniacs and comic-book historians that during the second half of the 1970s, the best Batman stories appeared in 1977's *Detective Comics* #471–476. Who can forget the concluding installment of the classic Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers series in 'Tec #476? Batman had defeated the Joker (albeit temporarily), been cleared of charges perpetrated by corrupt Gotham politician Boss Rupert Thorne, and been rejected by his latest girlfriend, Silver St. Cloud. Silver was deeply in love with Bruce Wayne, but could not continue their relationship knowing that he was the Batman. The final shot of Batman swinging between Gotham skyscrapers is spectacular, yet a glint of light prevents us from seeing the Dark Knight's face. Is his expression grim, driven, full of exhaustion, or anguish? We don't know. It's a startling scene, as powerful as any great cinematic ending, and it was published during the David V. Reed era of Batman's now 70-plus-year history.

I can imagine the collective groan amongst Batmaniacs and comic-book historians as they read, "The David V. Reed era of Batman's history." (Of course, there were other writers chronicling the exploits of Batman at that time besides Reed and Englehart, but that's a subject for a different article.) Reed debuted on Batman for a second time (more on the first later) in *Batman* #267 (Sept. 1975) with "Invitation to a Murder!," illustrated by Ernie Chua and Dick Giordano and edited by Julius Schwartz. Reed provided scripts for *Batman* #269–285, 287–294, and 296–304. He also chronicled Batman's exploits in *Detective Comics* #452, 453, 454, and 465; *Batman Family* #20; and *DC Special Series* #15, for a total of 41 stories in just over three years. That's an impressive run, and also an overlooked one. Moreover, for many who actually bought and read Reed's stories at their time of publication, it's a period purposely neglected. I'm also certain there are a few who feel it best that the Reed era be dismissed and forgotten, with the exception of the Englehart/Rogers stories, of course.

This is criminal, because many of Reed's stories were highly inventive, exhibiting a detailed flair for intriguing crime drama, including espionage and hints of the supernatural, which suited the detective aspect of Batman quite well. While the artwork didn't always complement the scripts, the Reed era was neither failure nor disaster. It was competent, clever, lively, exasperating, at times crazy-bad, but most of all entertaining and certainly worth checking

"Who is David V. Reed?"

The mystery surrounding the identity of '70s Batman writer David V. Reed—actually David Vern Reed (1924–1989), known earlier as '50s Batman writer David Vern—disappointed readers expecting a bigger name behind the credit. Seen here is detail from Jim Aparo's cover to *Batman* #294 (Dec. 1977)—featuring a Reed story drawn by John Calnan and Tex Blaisdell—with some alterations to the original word balloons.

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Slash of the Titans

(center) Detail from Ernie Chua's (a.k.a. Ernie Chan) cover art to *Batman* #274 (Apr. 1976), a dynamic illustration by the series' short-lived artist and Reed collaborator. (below) Chua's cover to *Batman* #276 (June 1976), featuring the Spook.

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WHO WERE DAVID V. REED'S ARTISTS?

The artwork on Reed's scripts in *Batman*, made up of two stints by Ernie Chua and John Calnan; a brief run by Mike Grell; a two-parter by Romeo Tanghal; one-shots by Rich Buckler, Sal Amendola, and Walter Simonson; and a guest-appearance by longtime Batman artist Irv Novick, were rich and varied, and in many cases a lot to be desired.

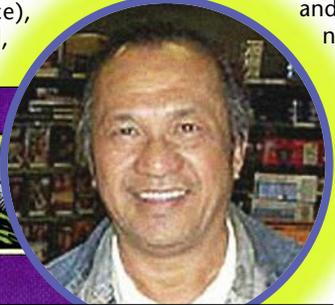
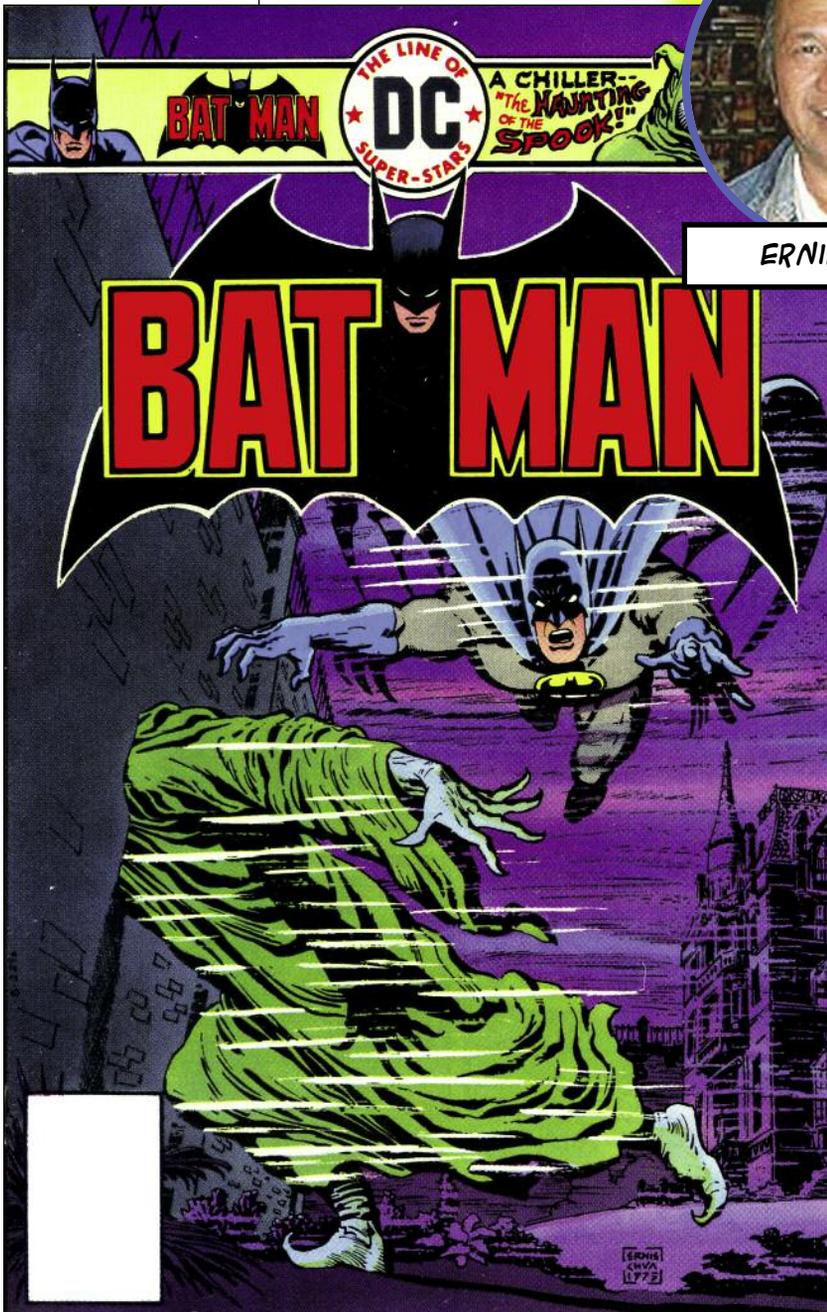
One might surmise that illustrator Ernie Chua (now Chan), at that time one of many talented Filipino artists enhancing the look of DC's mystery titles, was granted a breakthrough role in illustrating *Batman*, beginning in *Batman* #262 (Apr. 1975). Not so fast. *Batman* and *Detective Comics* were poor sellers in the 1970s, and both were demoted to bimonthly status in 1973. While both returned to a monthly schedule in 1975 (where *Batman* has remained ever since), *Detective Comics* did not fare so well,

dropping to bimonthly status on two occasions and almost being canceled during the DC Implosion of 1978.

What Chua brought to the artistic table, especially when matched with the outstanding inking of Dick Giordano, was not just the prerequisite dark tone and deep shadows. Chua provided a more fluent choreography and cinematic flow to the action sequences, especially when he inked his own pencils. What eventually went wrong was that Chua also became DC's premier cover artist at that time, and the increased workload radically diminished his visual storytelling, making everything appear rushed and relaxed in detail.

"I think Ernie always tried to do his best on everything he drew," adds Rozakis, "but as he became busier and busier at DC, he had to work faster and was less able to devote time to nuance."

On top of that, editor Schwartz's selection of Tex Blaisdell as inker to Chua was damaging. Blaisdell's inks



ERNIE CHAN



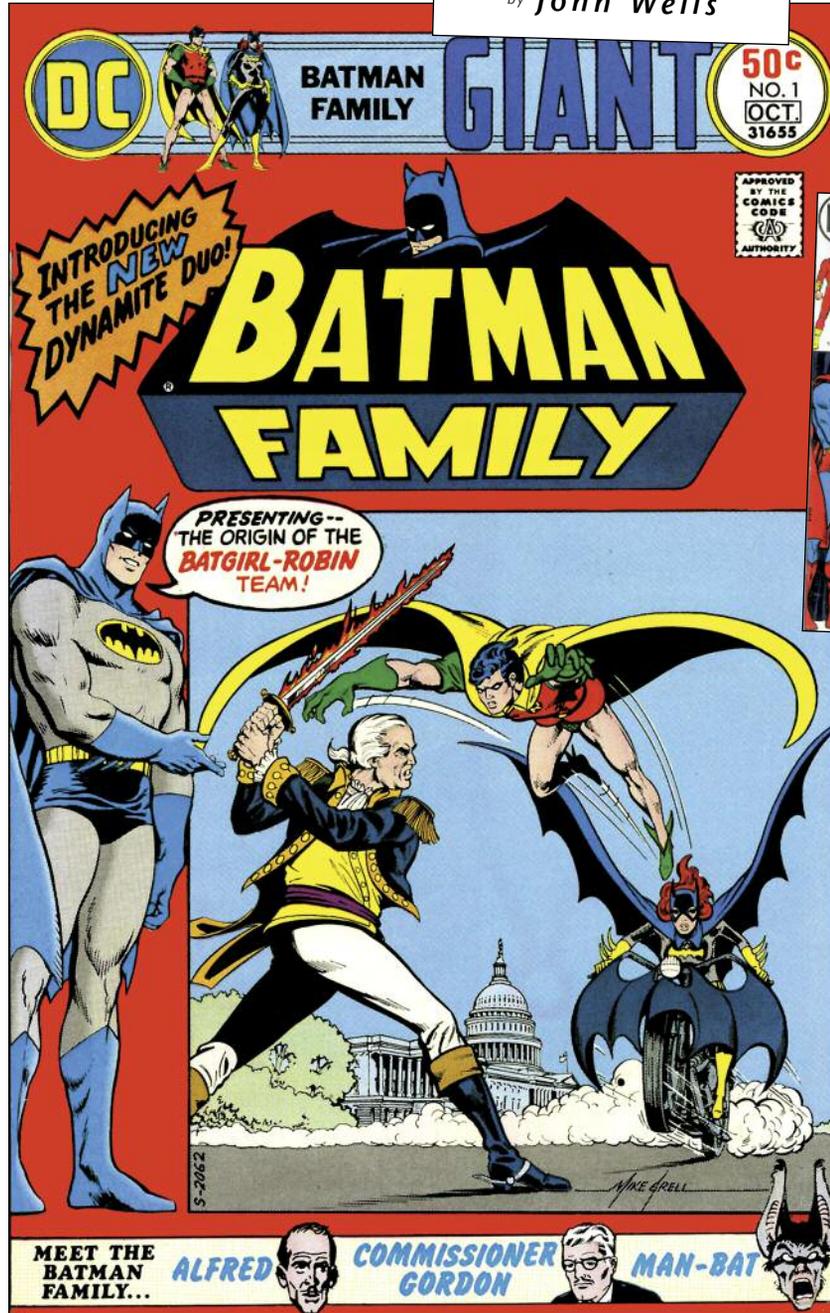
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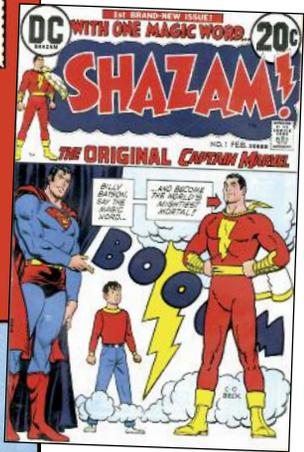
BATMAN FAMILY

by John Wells



You've raised your kids, taught them everything you know, and sent them out into the world. But all that knowledge and skill is worthless without a place to try your wings.

Just ask Batgirl and Robin. By 1975, she was living with that nice Superman family across the way and the Teen Wonder was stuck in the back room of one of Batman's properties. They needed a nurturing home where they could grow and they were about to get it.



As with so many family matters, money had been at the heart of things. In 1968, editor Julius Schwartz was dealing with the fallout from the cancellation of ABC's *Batman* TV series that had sent sales soaring only two years earlier. His solution, famously, was to return Batman to his roots as a dark solo character in the fall of 1969 with the help of talent like Denny O'Neil, Frank Robbins, Neal Adams, Irv Novick, and Dick Giordano.

How Many Artists Can You Count on This Cover?

Technically, the cover to *Batman Family* #1 (Sept–Oct. 1975) wasn't an artists' jam, but it still gave that impression: The Robin/Batgirl dominant image is by that story's interior artist, Mike Grell. It's introduced by a Batman that was originally drawn as a Superman figure by Nick Cardy (with Murphy Anderson retouching the face) for *Shazam!* #1 (inset). And don't get us started on those headshots at the bottom!

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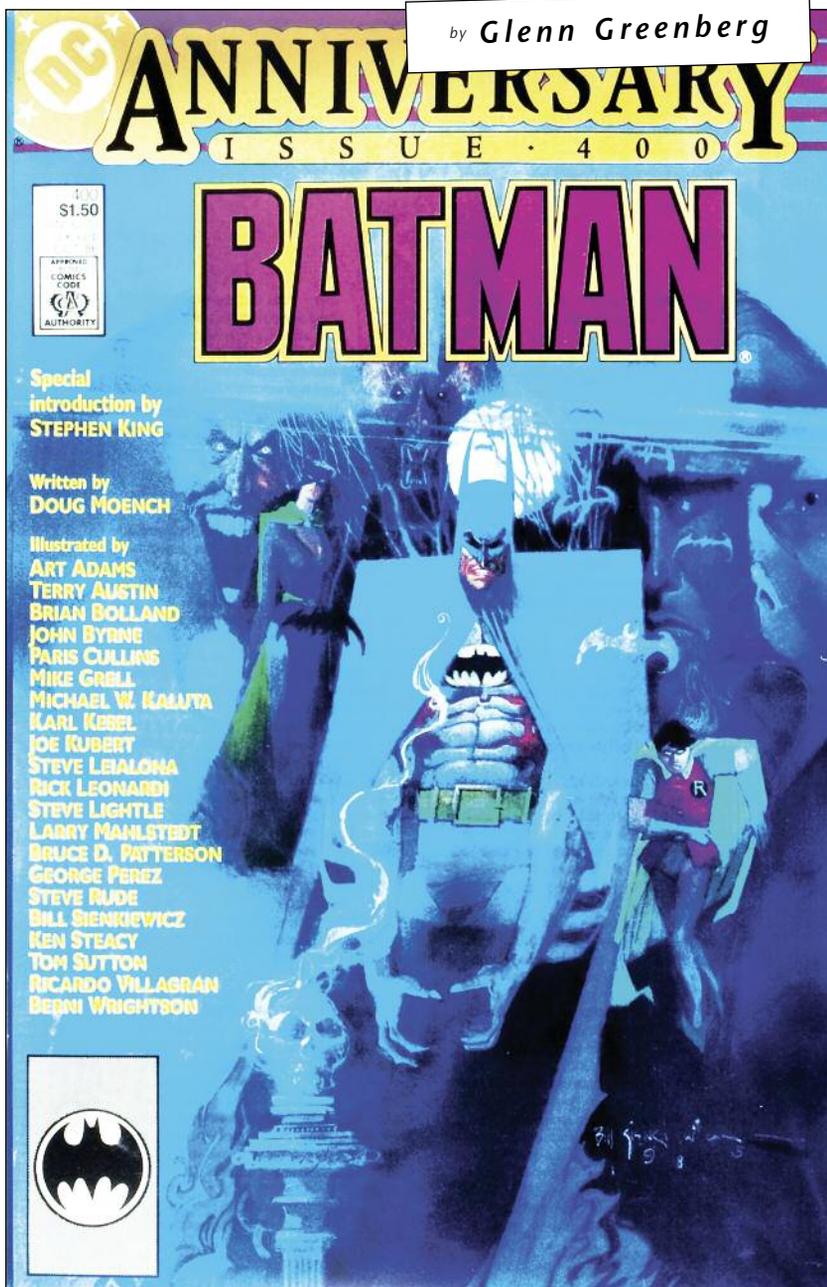
BATMAN™

TO BASICS

...AND BEYOND

BATMAN BEFORE THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

by Glenn Greenberg



FlashBack!

The Batman was at something of a midpoint in his long evolution during the late 1970s and early 1980s. A run of stories in *Detective Comics*, written by Steve Englehart and illustrated by Walter Simonson, Al Milgrom, Marshall Rogers, and Terry Austin (*Detective Comics* #469–476, May 1977–Apr. 1978), rightly became an instant classic, considered by many to be the “definitive” take on the character. Restored to his roots as a “dark creature of the night” several years earlier, primarily by writer Denny O’Neil and artist Neal Adams, the Batman was far away from the campiness of the Adam West television series of the 1960s. But he was also not yet the angry, grim, anti-social, borderline psychopath he would become (and, for the most part, remains today) in the wake of Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

It’s safe to say that no Batman storyline produced between Englehart and Miller has received anywhere near the attention or the adulation bestowed upon the works of those two gentlemen. But the fact is, during that “in-between” period, the Batman was in the hands of some of the top writers and artists in the comic-book industry, and underwent some of the biggest, most significant changes in his history—changes that are still being felt to this day.

WEIN EARNS HIS WINGS

In the late 1970s, the two main Batman titles, *Batman* and *Detective Comics*, were produced much like they had been for the previous four decades: as two comic-book series starring the same main character, but otherwise having little to do with each other. Each book had its own writer and art team, doing their own things as long as their stories didn’t directly contradict each other.

Such was the case when writer Len Wein became a regular part of the Batman’s world. Wein first took over *Detective* following Englehart’s departure, with Marshall Rogers remaining as penciler. Wein picked up directly where Englehart left off, and acknowledged one of the key story points from his predecessor’s run.

“I had to deal with Silver St. Cloud (Bruce Wayne’s love interest, who discovered that he was the Batman and left Gotham as a result), the effects she had on his life. But beyond that, I didn’t see anything that I really needed to pick up on,” Wein says.

Forging ahead with Rogers, Wein crafted a two-parter that introduced the third villain to operate under the name “Clayface” (*Detective Comics* #478–479, Aug.–Oct. 1978).

But Wein’s run on *Detective* was short-lived. After those two issues, he moved over to *Batman*, beginning

Batman in the ‘80s

Fans tend to overlook the period between the Englehart/Rogers Batman of the late ‘70s and Miller’s *Dark Knight* of 1986, but that era produced many memorable moments in Bat-lore, including the anniversary issue, *Batman* #400 (Oct. 1986). Cover by Bill Sienkiewicz.

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TM & © DC Comics.

a long stint with #307 (Jan. 1979). Denny O’Neil returned to replace Wein on *Detective*, usually paired with artist Don Newton. Highlights from the O’Neil/Newton issues of *Detective* included the introduction of crimelord Maxie Zeus (*Detective Comics* #483, May 1979) and the murder of the original Batwoman/ Kathy Kane (*Detective Comics* #485, Sept. 1979, seen at left).

For Wein, the offer to chronicle the adventures of the Batman was enough to lure him away from Marvel Comics, where he had been a mainstay—and even editor-in-chief for a short period—over the previous few years. But in the early 1970s, Wein was a writer for DC, where he and Bernie Wrightson launched the original *Swamp Thing* series.



LEN WEIN

“Giving me Batman to write was how they got me back to DC,” Wein says. “Jenette Kahn had become the publisher, and she really wanted me back. I was busy doing *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Fantastic Four*, and *Thor* over at Marvel. But DC offered me the one thing I really couldn’t turn down, which was Batman. ‘Cuz I loooooove Batman.”

Under the guidance of his editor and close friend, the legendary Julius Schwartz, Wein’s run on *Batman* kicked off with the introduction of a new character who would prove to have great staying power and become increasingly important to the mythos—in the comic books and beyond.

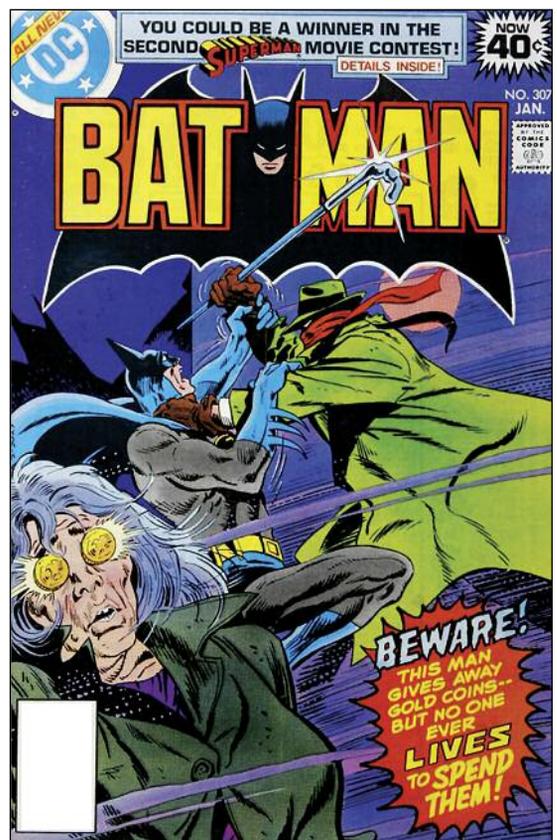
“I introduced Lucius Fox (Bruce Wayne’s business manager) in my first issue of *Batman*,” Wein notes. “In that issue, Bruce Wayne is having a meeting with Lucius and he and Lucius are supposed to be discussing Wayne Enterprises business. But Bruce is sitting there, looking out the window, because he’s just waiting for the sun to go down. And when the sun finally sets in the middle of the meeting, Bruce says, ‘Okay, we’ll talk tomorrow, I’ve gotta go—bye!’”



Wein’s Winners

(left) Len Wein created Clayface III, seen here in *Detective* #479, and Lucius Fox, who premiered in (right) *Batman* #307. Cover art by Rogers/Austin and Aparo, respectively.

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A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

Nocturna:

BATMAN'S FORGOTTEN FEMME FATALE

by Jonathan Miller



THE NEW
DC
THERE'S NO STOPPING US NOW.

The Batman, well known to be a bachelor in his alter ego of Bruce Wayne, is equally famous for his colorful array of female acquaintances, both friendly and not so. While none have truly rivaled Catwoman in the public's affection, for a time one did replace her in Batman's. Beginning with *Detective Comics* #529 (Aug. 1983) and continuing for more than two years, Natalia Knight, alias Nocturna, supplanted the feline felon as Batman's number-one bad girl.

With her raven locks and alabaster skin, dressed in a midnight-blue evening gown, Nocturna might have looked like she had stepped from the pages of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* had she debuted a few years later. Then the expanding Goth subculture might have boosted her popularity. As it was, her role in the Batman mythos was limited, significant but not lasting. Conceived by Doug Moench and masterfully illustrated by Gene Colan, Nocturna was a surprisingly natural fit for the Batman titles, one that illuminated the fact that Batman's roots could be traced beyond pulp fiction to Gothic romance.

Doug Moench describes his inspiration for Nocturna as follows: "As I recall, the Batman titles of the time were rather starved for female characters. I also wanted to explore one of the main elements of the Batman mythos, namely the *night*, and bring more duality to that exploration by counterpointing night's darkness and dread with its romance and wonder. With those two objectives in mind, the Nocturna character seemed to plummet from the star-shot sky right into my head. As with Moon Knight, another of my 'night' characters, I saw Nocturna as pretty much black and white—moon and shadows, stars and deep space. Hence her black hair and utterly white skin."

She was a peculiarly literary type of character, with her convoluted, borderline incestuous family history. The ward of a wealthy criminal, Charles Knight, after Knight's death Natalia becomes the lover of his son, Anton. Natalia is in love with the night sky, working as an astronomer at Gotham Observatory. As Nocturna, she travels in a hot-air balloon and becomes Anton's partner in crime when he operates as the Thief of Night.

At the same time, she's a bit of a throwback to the kitsch villains of Batman's classic era, operating with an overriding theme like Penguin and the Calendar Man. Like the original Batwoman, her weapons double as fashion accessories, including a razor-sharp crescent-shaped belt buckle, a stiletto hairpin, and a gas-filled pearl necklace. Her perfume is a narcotic. She turns to crime after an accident with laser radiation drains her

Strangers in the Night

Nocturna's presence in the 1980s Bat-titles may have been short-lived, but this Doug Moench-created villainess resonated with fans—and got under the skins of the Dynamic Duo, as this Ed Hannigan/Dick Giordano cover to *Batman* #377 (Nov. 1984) shows.

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The UNTOLD LEGEND of the

BAT MAN™

THE ORIGIN THAT DID NOT LAST

FlashBack!

In 1980 DC Comics decided to launch a three-issue miniseries presenting the definitive origin of the Batman and most of his supporting characters. Announced as full of surprises and character improvements, this "new" origin was, in fact, short-lived.

It may be hard to envision today that the origin of one of the top characters in comics could be told in less than two pages, and that it did not even take place in the character's first appearance. And yet, such was the case with Batman.

The Caped Crusader premiered in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939), but no origin introduced the character. It took a few months to see his backstory told in the first two pages of *Detective Comics* #33 (Nov. 1939).

Nine years later, *Batman* #47 (June–July 1948) re-presented the origin of Batman and introduced Joe Chill, the killer of his parents, Martha and Thomas Wayne, and Chill's fate. Then in *Detective Comics* #235 (Sept. 1956) it was revealed that Thomas Wayne, Bruce Wayne's father, was the first person to wear a Batman disguise. That event would play an important role in his death. Things remained more or less the same for 20 years. In 1976 an old lady named Leslie Thompkins was introduced as the person who had helped young Bruce Wayne after his parents' demise (*Detective Comics* #457, Mar. 1976).

Along the way, of course, a whole set of characters had joined the Dark Knight. There were allies (Robin, Batgirl, Alfred, Commissioner Gordon), villains (the Joker, Two-Face). Most of them had a proper "origin" (e.g., Robin in *Detective Comics* #38, Apr. 1940) and some just joined along the way (Jim Gordon, for instance; Alfred's case would be worth a specific article on its own).

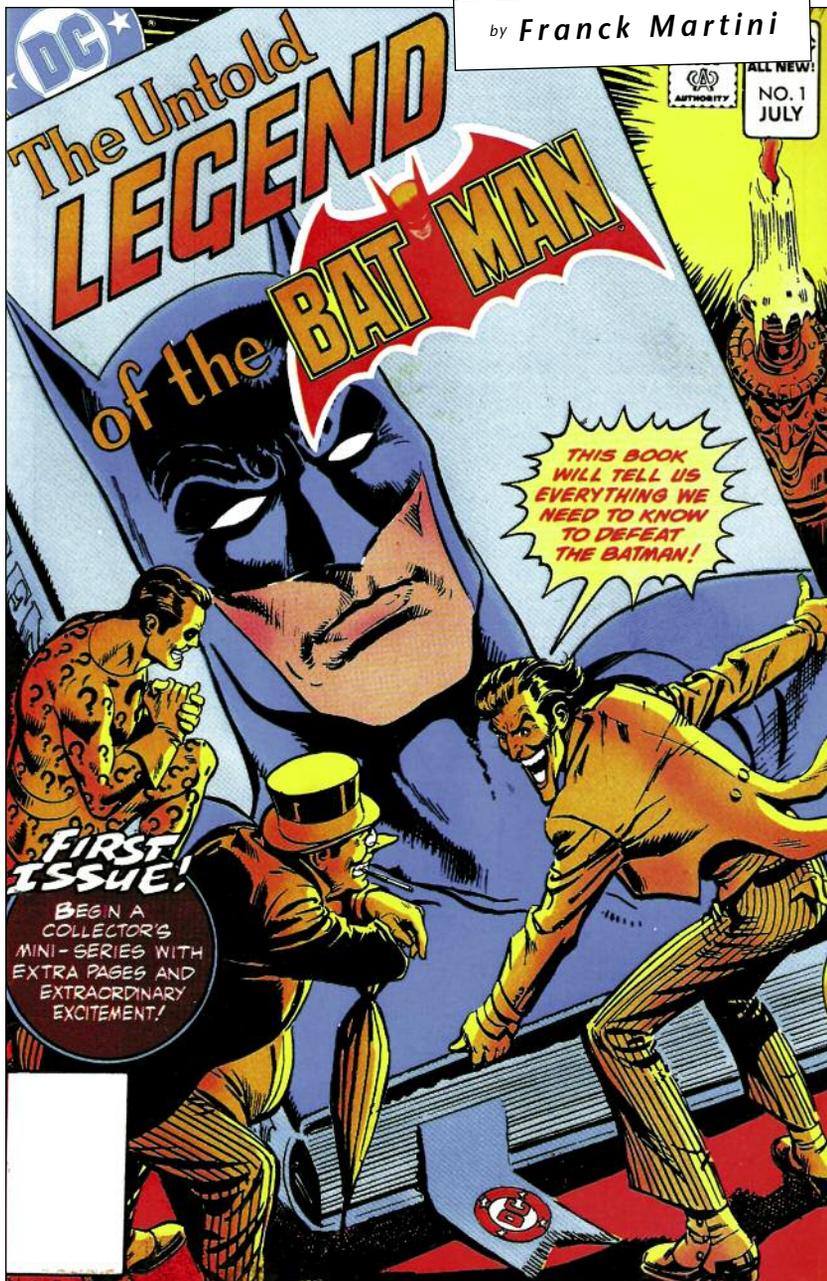
USING A NEW FORMAT

Following the (in)famous "DC Explosion" and subsequent Implosion, DC Comics launched the miniseries format with *World of Krypton* #1–3 in 1979. This first miniseries presented details of life on Krypton before its destruction.

This three-issue format was also selected to retell the origin of Batman. Since the book was to reveal secrets and be full of "extraordinary excitement" (as announced on the cover of issue #1), it was called *The Untold Legend of the Batman*.

John Byrne penciled the first issue, inked by Jim Aparo, who remained as penciler and inker on the remaining two issues after Byrne's departure. It was Byrne's first DC work and it did not work out the way he wanted. He told Jon B. Cooke and Eric Nolen-Weathington in 2006's *Modern Masters* Vol. 7, "It was a three-month hole in my schedule, and it ended up taking Len (Wein) something like nine months to write it (the whole story), so I was only able to do the first issue."

by Franck Martini



The Legend Begins Here...

...but doesn't last long due to continuity revisions. Still, this oft-reprinted 1980 miniseries remains highly re-readable and a favorite among fans of the day. Cover to issue #1 (July 1980) by José Luis García-López.

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I had issues with Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns in 1986. In fact, like most of you, I had four issues—the entire miniseries. And like most of you, I loved them. That biased opinion out of the way... I'll explain why.

Superhero comics in the 1980s, for many a baby boomer in his or her 20s, were getting stale and uninspired. The exceptions to that—well-received efforts like the new *X-Men* under the team of Claremont/Cockrum/Byrne/Austin and *The New Teen Titans* by the Wolfman/Pérez team—proved that that there was still lots of inventiveness left in the genre... but others, while nicely handled, continued to drive over familiar territory time and time again.

It wasn't the creators' faults. They had rich casts of supporting characters, villains, and heroes to work with that were still exciting in and of themselves. Something just seemed... missing.

Beginning in the late '70s, Frank Miller was one of comicdom's hottest creators. From the time he was touted on as a special talent in the Bullpen Bulletins preceding his penciling job on *Daredevil* #158 (May 1979), he made good on Stan Lee's proclamation of praise. *Daredevil* became the title to get. Other Miller successes followed. One was the all-star collaboration with writer Chris Claremont on the *Wolverine* miniseries in 1982.

Direct-sales comics stores in the late '70s added Miller sections in their behind-the-counter specialty boxes... or short boxes filled with comics with just Miller's covers! The young raconteur from Vermont had arrived, and along with George Pérez, John Byrne, Dave Cockrum, and writers Claremont and Marv Wolfman (among others), proved that the superhero excitement of the '60s and early '70s wasn't over and done.

Miller's *Wolverine* was a big hit. *Ronin*, Miller's DC miniseries from '83, showed the writer/artist's brilliance with completely original material, and *Daredevil* was on ongoing treat.

Frank Miller had worked on Batman before *Dark Knight*, drawing a one-shot Christmas story for *DC Special Series* #21 (Spring 1980). While certainly above the regular efforts of those years, it was still... another Batman story, and Batman hadn't been special since the late 1970s. This new Batman miniseries would be grander, Frank announced. He told interviewer Mark Borax in *Comics Interview* #31 (1986) that "it feels so much bigger than anything I've done. The whole world is involved in what goes on. Comic-book writers have largely avoided taking their material so seriously that they show what its social consequences would be, and that particular question is the most fascinating one for me in the series."

Batman Returns

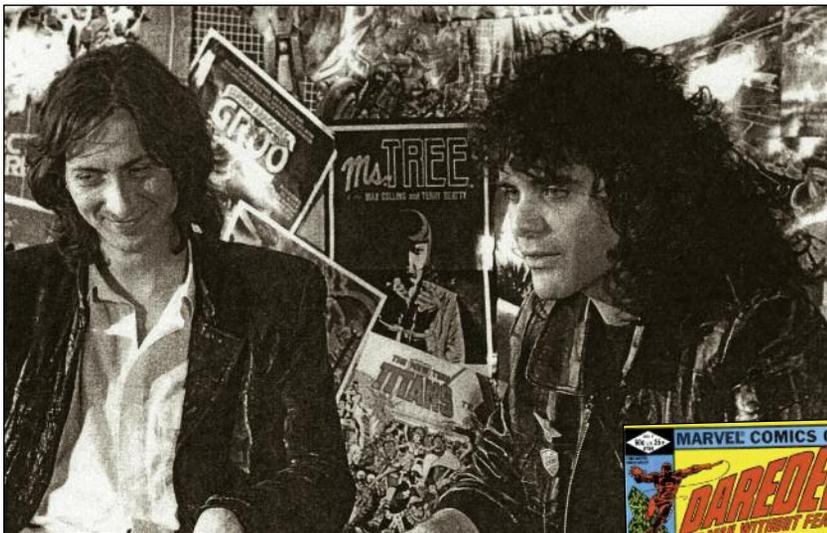
Detail from Frank Miller's electrifying cover to *Dark Knight* #1 (1986). Unfortunately, Miller was unavailable for comment for this article.

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THERE WERE FOUR DARK AND STORMY KNIGHTS

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEMINAL
MILLER/JANSON/VARLEY
1986 MINISERIES,
**BATMAN:
THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS**

by **Jerry Boyd**



HAVING AN ISSUE WITH AGING

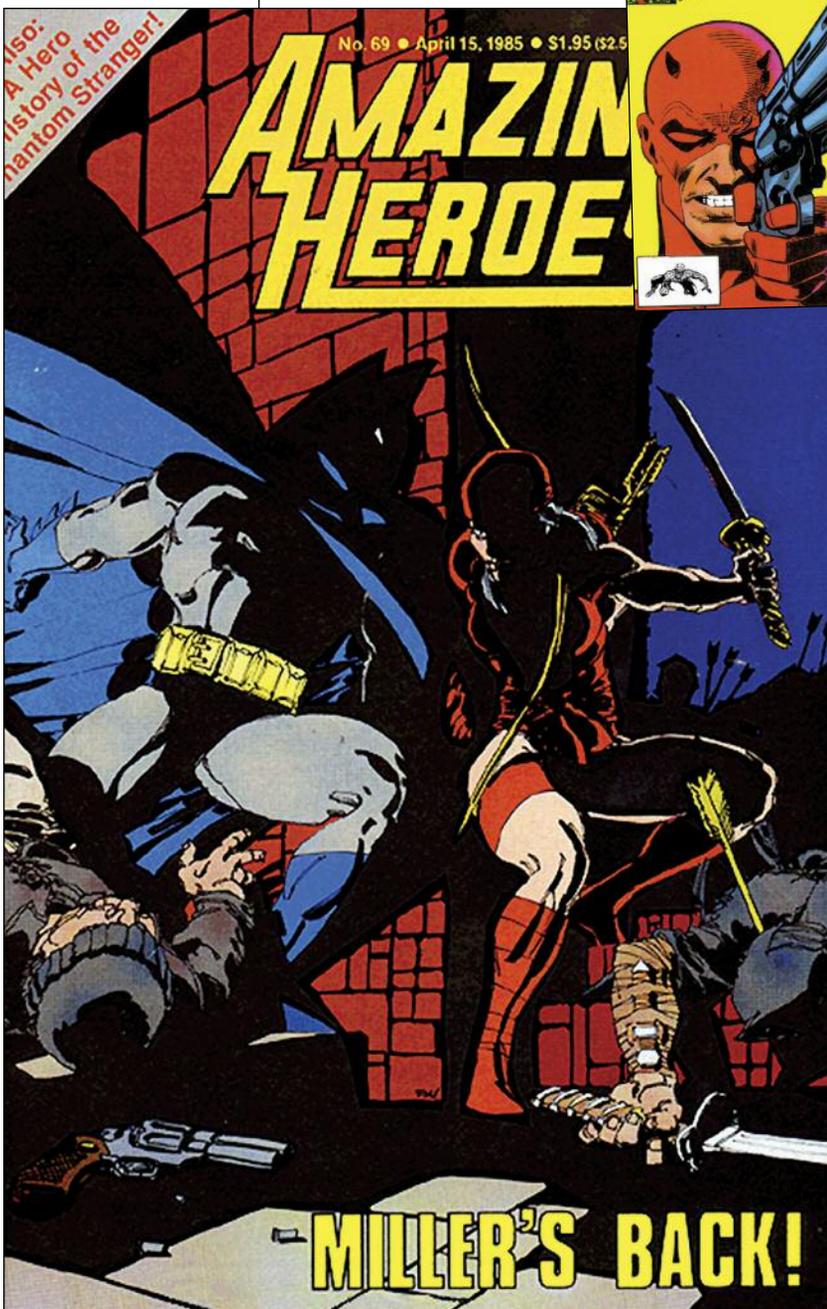
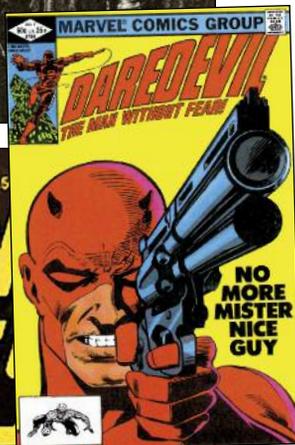
Miller on Batman—would this new mini be an all-around critically acclaimed cash cow like the *Daredevil* and *Wolverine* spectaculars, or would it be more experimental and groundbreaking like *Ronin*? Readers would just have to wait and see. Frank was clearly smitten with the potential richness of his material. He said that this Batman series would be “very strong, very operatic.” He admitted he was aiming for a slightly different audience (more on this later) than the monthly book. He explained in the aforementioned magazine, “I waste less time now because I’m sure of my footing. Another major difference [from *Ronin*] is that Batman is much more of a crowd pleaser.”

The largest differential in the storyline’s equation was a middle-aged Bruce Wayne, somewhere between 55–60 years of age (!), placed at center stage in Miller’s updated but recognizable future. Miller mused, somewhat jokingly, that he’d begun reading the Caped Crusader’s adventures when he was nine years old or so, and Bruce was around 31 in them. When the artist got his big break at Marvel in 1979, he was 22 and Bruce was 31. Now that he was about to do his take on the Dark Knight in what he called his “Great American Superhero Story,” Miller was in 29 in 1986... and Bruce Wayne was still 31 in the regular titles. Miller added that Wayne as Batman had always faced solving crimes with a sense of urgency, but never had to fight *time itself*. He’d always gone into action in tip-top shape, at the top of his physical prowess, speed, and strength. The same was with Robin,

for that matter. He never had to face the slowing down that comes with age. That would change in this story arc.

Batman had to fight not only criminals, but make adjustments for his own declining skills and weakened body, Frank decided. He’d be placed in a storyline where “he’s a bit less patient now because he’s got a certain amount of time left.” A Bruce Wayne pushing 60?? This was unheard of, except in the “imaginary stories” of decades past. Still, Miller had cannily added an imperfection, thrown bodily into the nearly perfect Darknight Detective. There had been “last Batman stories” before, but this epic would also embrace the earliest mythical incarnation of the Masked Manhunter as a predatory avenger, a menacing cloaked figure who smiled grimly as he disrupted the criminal element that threatened the peace and stability of his beloved Gotham. Gone, at a certain point in the first issue, would be Wayne’s conflict in resuming his nocturnal career and the “very heavy narration” (Miller’s words again) that accompanies the suspenseful return to the Batcave and the Batman’s return.

In the first issue, we find Wayne racing cars professionally, a James Gordon facing retirement, and a



Bat-Buzz

(top) Miller (left) interviewed by Scott Fresina at LA’s Golden Apple Comics in early ‘86.

(inset) *Daredevil*’s success paved the way for *Dark Knight*. (bottom) *Amazing Heroes* #69 (April 15, 1985) also touted Frank’s work.

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