HERITAGE
AUCTIONS

Photos of Frank Miller and the Dark Knight Returns artwork were taken by Heritage Auctions on April 26, 2022, in our New York office, during his interview about "The Dark Knight Returns" Book One cover.

Batman: *The Dark Knight Returns*
By Frank Miller and Lynn Varley
Lot 91074 in Platinum Session of
Comics & Comic Art Signature® Auction #7274
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Frank Miller and Lynn Varley
Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1 Cover Original Art (DC, 1986).
Ink over graphite on Bristol board with airbrush color work
12" x 18" image area
Signed by both artists as "FM/LV" in the lower center
Estimate: $2,000,000+

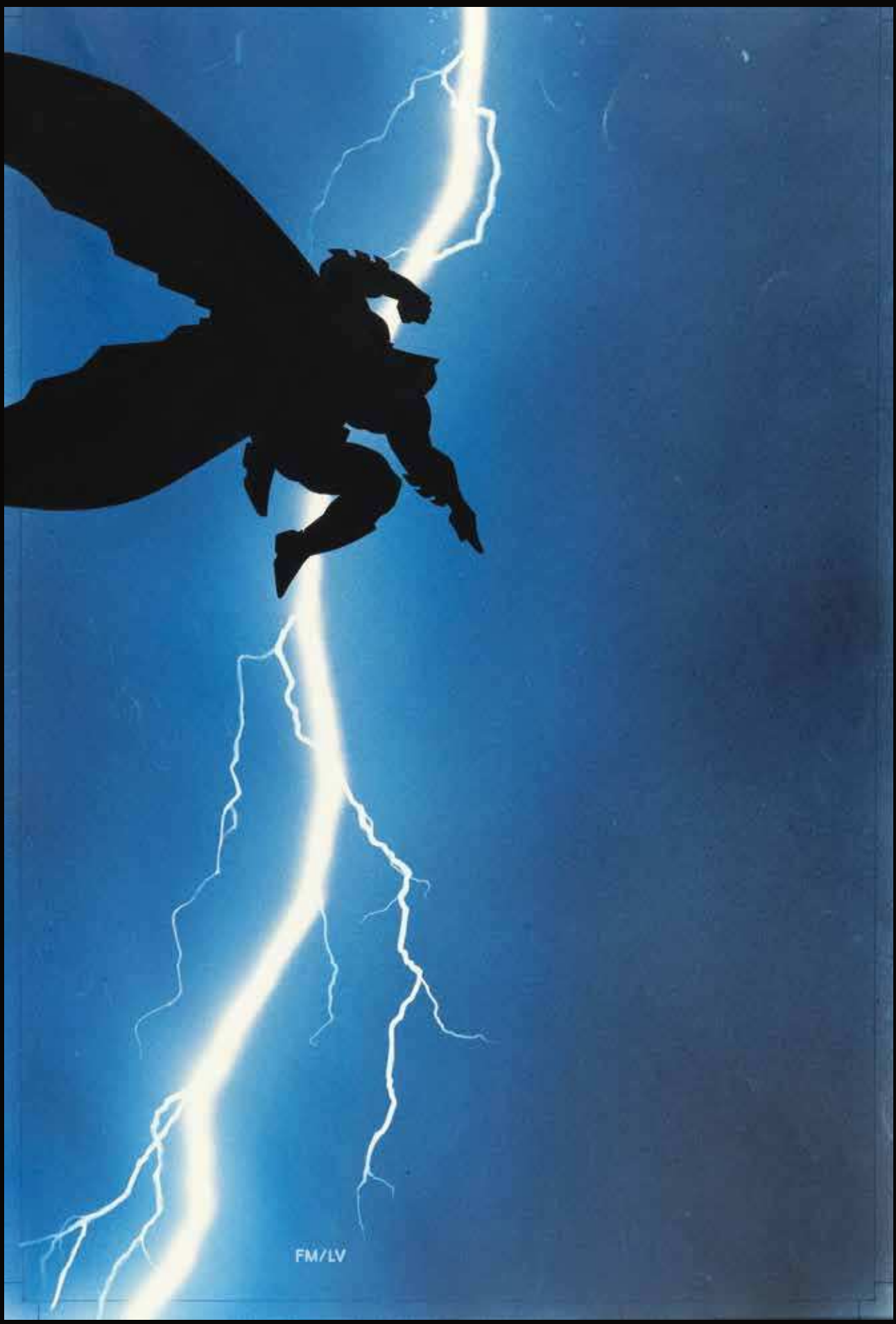
Frank Miller's 1980s Batman tale *The Dark Knight Returns* is the graphic novel responsible for redefining the depth, tone, and range of storytelling possibilities for the entire super-hero genre, in the process paving the way as primary influence on the filmic universe that has taken over worldwide popular culture.

The dystopian future-epic was the lightning strike that revitalized the Caped Crusader's place in the DC Universe, and the original artwork for this cover to the first issue of the pioneering story is easily one of the most famous comic book covers *from any era of all time*, as well as the single most resonant image from the series, defining the entire superhero genre from the 1980s to now, not only in comics, but the broader culture, including the popular and acclaimed current *Batman* movie.

Such a widely reproduced, instantly recognizable, and transcendent original now lives in the broadest possible realm of American art, and the bold image speaks to generations. Miller's award-winning career as a wildly innovative creator reached its apex with this four-issue story, which was immediately recognized as one of the most important graphic novels of all time, and which has remained continually in print as a modern classic. As author of comic book and film properties such as *Sin City* and *300*, all of Miller's formidable storytelling and artistic skill is in full display in this gritty, realistic, and emotionally moving tale, which transports the superhero from the world of adolescent fantasy into an increasingly realistic contemporary urban climate, single-handedly transforming Batman into one of fiction's most resonant characters within American culture.

Any original from this series is among the most desirable original art from the history of comics, but a cover of this magnitude—the key introductory image from a series with so much influence on the entire comic industry—has never before been offered at auction.

This first issue of *The Dark Knight* marks the first appearance of Miller's Robin, Carrie Kelley, the only female Robin, who saves Batman (and goes on to later become Batman), with the graphic strike of the image definitive of the story's tone and themes, a boldly composed and beautifully rendered statement on comics' transition into fine art. With the ever-increasing popularity and critical and popular acclaim for the rich and varied comic stories epitomized by *The Dark Knight*—as well as the commensurate viability in the realm of fine art and newly rising market values for the best of the best—this artwork is poised to both achieve the highest price of all time for an American comic book cover, and redefine the understanding of an entire history of art.


FM/LV

RIDE THE LIGHTNING

By Dan Nadel

Frank Miller remembers, with a smile, that the cover of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* Book One "struck me like a bolt out of the blue." That lightning bolt illuminating Gotham City's night sky and silhouetting Batman hit Miller in 1985, just after he'd sent off his penciled pages to be inked by Klaus Janson. Miller was 28 at the time, living with his longtime collaborator Lynn Varley in a downtown Los Angeles loft, having moved west at the very beginning of their work on the new series. The cover needed to really sing – there were no guarantees on the series' pricey new format and idiosyncratic take on a beloved but fading character.

At the time the Vermont-born, comics-raised young cartoonist Miller was coming off a popular run on *Daredevil*, followed by *Ronin*, a wild-style limited series that fused samurai stories, psychedelic science fiction and neo-expressionist painting. Miller and writer Steve Gerber had hatched a plan to revamp the three pillars of DC Comics: Wonder Woman, Superman and Batman. And while numerous superhero reinventions followed *The Dark Knight Returns*, only Miller's emerged from those initial plans.

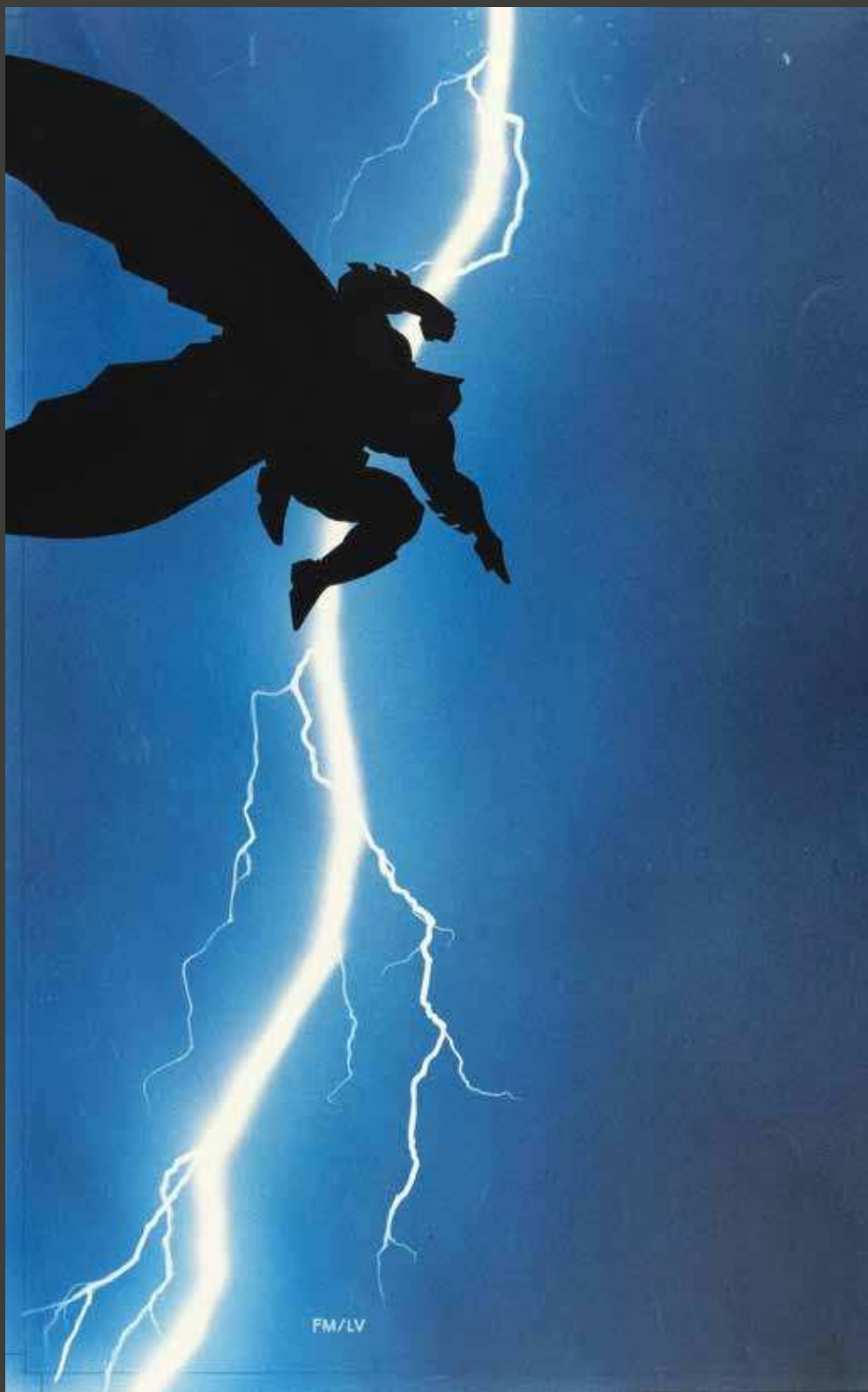
The series was a darkly satirical celebration of Batman set in a Gotham that was built from Miller's impressions of a dangerous and carnivalesque late-'70s and early '80s Manhattan. It was the city of Jean-Michel Basquiat, No-Wave and Bernard Goetz. Chaos, opportunity, fear, adventure and love, all mixed together on any given block. Miller conceived of Batman as a moral force who would contend with a voluminous urban world, get pulled into and under it. It's the stuff of the writers Miller loved – from David Goodis to Jim Thompson to Charles Willeford. But to get to the emotional scale Miller required to take seriously the moral and philosophical investment he placed in Batman, he imported operatic grandeur into the proceedings – he needed to make Batman a repository for near-religious ideas of rebirth, justice, death and renewal. What better way to do so than to render the character as one would a religious icon – a form into which creators and readers alike could place all of their hopes and nightmares.

But the cover of the book had to do much more than just signal Miller's conceptual ambitions. It needed to be eye-catching, of course, telegraph that the series was something entirely new, and re-introduce the idea of Batman while maintaining the mystery of the story within. Comic book covers of the time, and in the half-century previous, screamed titles, blared colors, thumped headlines and left little to the imagination. The cover to Book One (and each of the other three in the series) is an elegant composition – spare and dignified, at once reminiscent of a film still, mid-century American abstraction, and 1920s French Art Deco. The drama of the image is in its balance of announcement and concealment. The silhouette is clearly not the lithe, gymnast Batman of the early 1980s, nor the sinewy detective of the '70s; not the blocky hero of the '50s and '60s or the athlete of the '40s. This is a new form for the hero, open to interpretation, and yet all details, like the story itself, are hidden. The lightning bolt, a classic trope of film noir, offers a clue that a revelation is within.

As in music, design and film, sometimes the simplest gestures are the best. A jagged line, a figure, a gentle gradient: that would do the trick. Once Miller had the design rough, he drew the lightning in pencil, placed the figure and the logo, and then Lynn Varley used an airbrush to light it all up, carefully protecting the icon with a frisket cut to mask Batman's bulky form. Miller then inked the figure, and suddenly the cover was complete. Varley's role

in this process can't be overstated. In the previous few years she'd applied an entirely new sensibility to comics, treating color as a painter would – equal to and sometimes far ahead of line and form. In Los Angeles, where the airbrush had reigned supreme in illustration for over a decade, Varley learned the tool from Olivia De Berardinis. She was, Miller said, a "revolutionary in the field. And part of the reason for the quality of her work, beyond her talent, is that she was never infected by comics' tradition. She comes from a fine art and commercial art background and brings that, along with her acute sense of drama, and simply magical sense of color, and strong drawing ability which one does need to light and model." (*The Comics Journal* No. 101, August 1985).

The light is still present in the drawing. It undergirds all of the drama of the cover. After readers pass through the luminescence, the story sprawls across Miller's new terrain, and we don't see Batman again until nearly halfway through the comic book. At that point, just as readers have been led through a frighteningly prescient Reaganite world, we meet the man inside that grandiose silhouette: a detailed figure, fleshy and full, leaping into the light. The sequence from cover to mid-point is a masterful crescendo from concealment to sudden, joyous revelation – like a thunder clap – and the series is off and running. Rarely has a comic book cover paid off so effectively within a narrative. When the printed comic book arrived, Miller showed the cover to

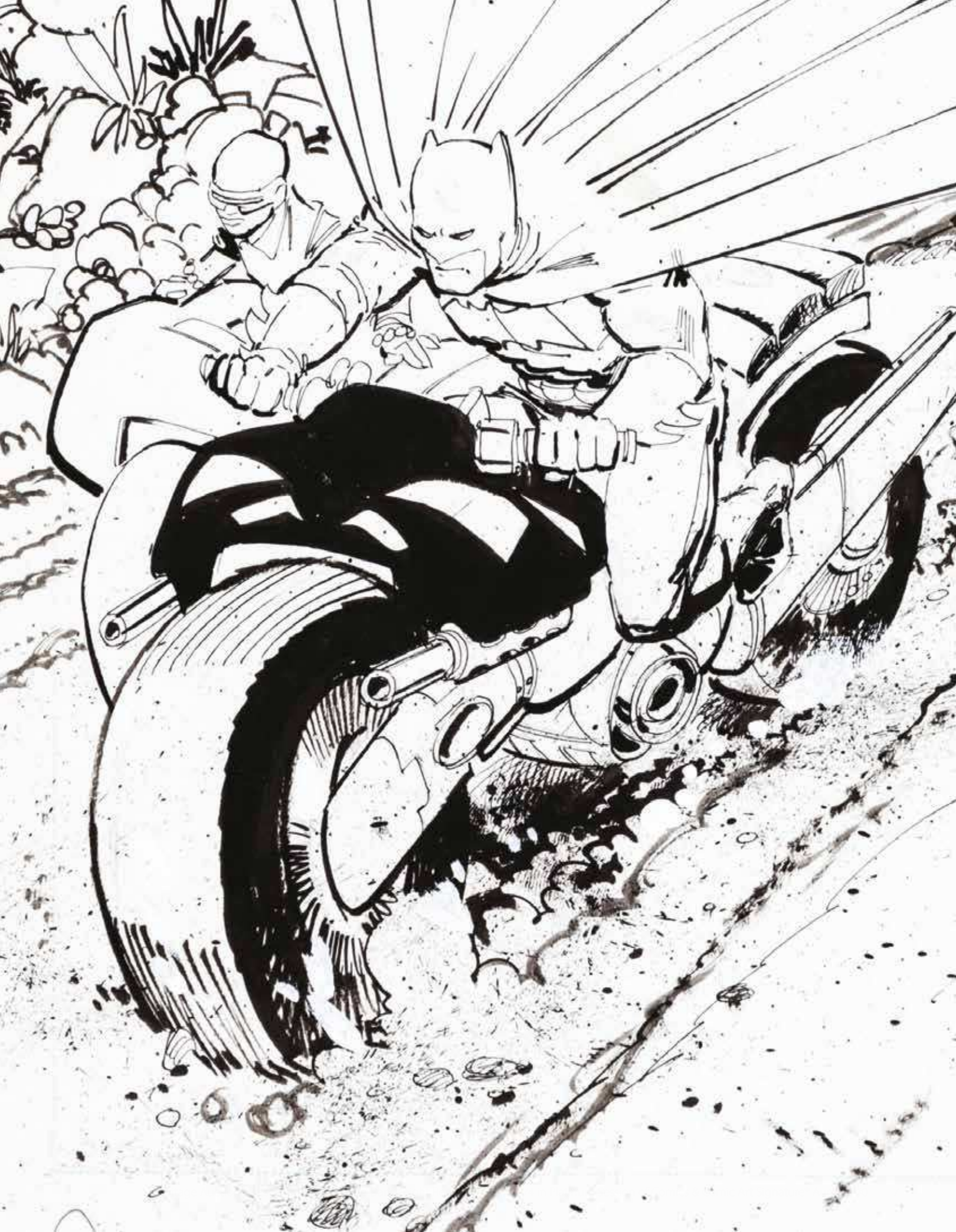


Varley and said, "it works." The printers with whom they had pushed the limits of offset lithography for *Ronin* knew what to expect, and all they had to get right was that pale yellow lightning bolt. And they did. It crosses expansive indigo sky as surely as a Barnett Newman zip, foregrounding a mysterious icon. Miller knew it looked like nothing else on the market. He knew he had something. He just hoped readers would agree.

In that first image are the seeds of the silhouette driven *Sin City* and so much more of Miller's work. It became one of the most widely imitated images in comic books – iterations, parodies, homages, continue today. *The Dark Knight Returns*, as a series, of course, didn't just impact every *Batman* comic book, television show and film that followed, right through to 2021's *The Batman*, but all superhero comics. From the notes Miller made while developing *The Dark Knight Returns*, he wrote the equally influential *Year One*. Soon countless superheroes were saddled with psychological and physical horror.

On the one hand, Miller's work offered proof that, given the right talent, the superhero genre could carry on, and perhaps just as importantly could find a foothold in bookstores across the country. But on some level, as Miller himself noted, the "grim and gritty" turn often blamed on him and Alan Moore was a fundamental misunderstanding of what he was up to. They were "falsely believed to be a revival of the superhero. I joked to Alan [Moore] that he did the autopsy and I did the brass band funeral. Still to me, that looks more like the end of something than any kind of beginning." (*The Comics Journal* No. 209, December 1998). In fact, *The Dark Knight Returns* was *both* an ending and a beginning. It marked the end of an old way of writing and rendering superheroes, and the beginning of a new era of graphic sophistication for Miller and the genre. That seemingly infinite night sky, lit from within and without remains promising, even generative – as fresh as the day the ink dried.

Dan Nadel *(b. 1976, Washington D.C.) is a writer and curator based in Brooklyn. He is the curator-at-large for the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, University of California, Davis, and a 2021-2022 fellow at the Leon Levy Center for Biography, at the Graduate Center, CUNY, for his forthcoming biography of Robert Crumb (Scribner, 2024).*



BATMAN, BORN AGAIN

By Elvis Mitchell

I've always thought of 1986 as the greatest year for American comic books. Three series landed that year that served as a barrage of body blows to the institutional malaise of comics. And two of them were written by Frank Miller: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Daredevil: Born Again*. (The other was, of course, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*.) Most of what has come since is the still-reeling medium trying to steady its feet and regain its focus after Miller's punches to its temple and solar plexus. And that still hasn't quite happened. Not yet.

The cover of *The Dark Knight Returns*' first book sums up Miller's ambition, momentum and wit. No Batman logo – even though someone at DC Comics must have been pulling on his sleeve, whispering, "C'mon, Frank, he's in silhouette! That little yellow circle will let people know what book it is. We can't even see his face! It looks like someone threw a gargoyle off a roof! And he's not even in the center of the frame. No one's gonna want this thing!"

All of those elements are so cunningly calculated to create a sense of location that so beautifully sets the tone for Miller's story, with its shifts from Spillane to Jung, roiling with both melodrama and absurdist humor. And it signals the droll simplicity of the artwork contained within. It boils down the sensibility, as though one threw Will Eisner's trenchant expressionism, Steve Ditko's baroque nighttime stillness and Jack Kirby's high-flying dynamism into the same pot, along with the fever-dream tang of Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader's *Taxi Driver*, and left it to simmer until the sticky, potent reduction clung to the sides of the vessel. The result was a comics version of Goya, so much so that the Batman series this cover begins could have been subtitled *Yard with Lunatics* after Goya's 1793 painting.

Of those three titles I mentioned, *The Dark Knight Returns* was the only one drawn by its writer. In a period when even some of the most potent imagery on many comic book covers was cluttered by the brand-waving offense of logos or – God help us – expository word balloons, *The Dark Knight Returns* was, in effect, in black and white. And that leap of visual imagination serves to symbolize the Batman who drives the story; I'm hard-pressed to think of another bet on the ability of a comics-reading audience (and, eventually, the world) to respond to such starkness. The cover, without the comics clichés of visual signposts to scream where we are – motion lines, bared teeth or even a shadow thrown against a wall or street – is unforgettable. Miller even dispenses with a DC standard: the Batman's ears, which had long since been distended to a stiletto's peak by the late Neal Adams, Miller's mentor. That ideal had been carried forward for the most part ever since (a harkening back to the original conception). Depicted on this cover, they suggest nothing so much as fangs.

The most radical thing Miller did in the 1980s was to say that the villains knew who they were, and that it was the heroes who were in need of an identity. For two of the heroes with the most formidable potential – Batman and Daredevil, both self-made adventurers forged by tragedy and sheer will into something more heroic by having their loved ones murdered – Miller took that trauma one step further, by stripping away the bourgeois trappings of their civilian alter egos and making them irrelevant.

There's a savage rebirth for both of these characters. At some point in the Miller runs of Batman and Daredevil, he tears them away from the sprayed-on suavity that made them quick-witted counter-punchers. In *Daredevil* No. 227, the beginning of "Born Again," we saw Matt Murdock curled into a fetal ball, his sinew providing the amniotic sac of a cocoon. That same year, on the cover of his debut writing and illustrating the world's greatest detective, Miller's Batman is tumbling from the skies – or is it the crest of a leap? – with a defining lightning bolt illuminating the heavens behind him. It also suggests a birth – or, rather, a rebirth.

Foregrounded before the white, curled finger of justice striking the earth like some kind of Dämmerung, his Batman, with his exaggerated forearms and calves, seems like a newborn framed by a flash of lightning – the birth of a new brand of justice in a night sky. Its sheer elegance is in its suggestion of the violence to come without a punch being thrown.

For all of the threat of violence and impending assault that *The Dark Knight Returns* Book One cover teases, it's also spectacularly funny. First, you laugh at the brazen clarity of image. For all of its bewildering juxtaposition of nuance and boldness, you smile at the forthright precision of rendering Batman in such a way. And let's not forget the titular redeployment of a Batman sobriquet – "The Dark Knight" – so expressive that in August 1986, the very month Miller's four-issue series wrapped, DC moved to trademark those three words. For all the associations Miller's new comics classicism evokes for me – and I'll stop boring you with them here – "The Second Coming" comes to mind, summoning the Apocalypse with its "mere anarchy loosed upon the world."

But the rough beast here isn't slouching towards Bethlehem. It's been flung at Gotham, and we can all hear the rough chuckle of Frank Miller as Batman falls soundlessly through the air on the cover of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Or maybe it's just the last line of *Kiss Me, Deadly* (and yes, Mickey Spillane moved from comics to other things, just like Miller):

"It was easy," I said.

Elvis Mitchell *is the host of The Treatment on KCRW-FM in Los Angeles.*

Photos of Frank Miller and the Dark Knight Returns artwork were taken by Heritage Auctions on April 26, 2022, in our New York office, during his interview about "The Dark Knight Returns" Book One cover.

THE MOST IMPORTANT BATMAN COMIC COVERS

By Michael Uslan

It can be endlessly debated which Batman comic book covers are the most important, historic, iconic. As an executive producer of Batman feature films and a longtime comic book historian, I accept the challenge and submit this list:

Detective Comics No. 27, May 1939.
The book that introduces The Bat-Man

Detective Comics No. 38, April 1940.
Here comes Robin, the Boy Wonder

Batman No. 1, Spring 1940.
This issue features the debuts of
The Joker and Catwoman.

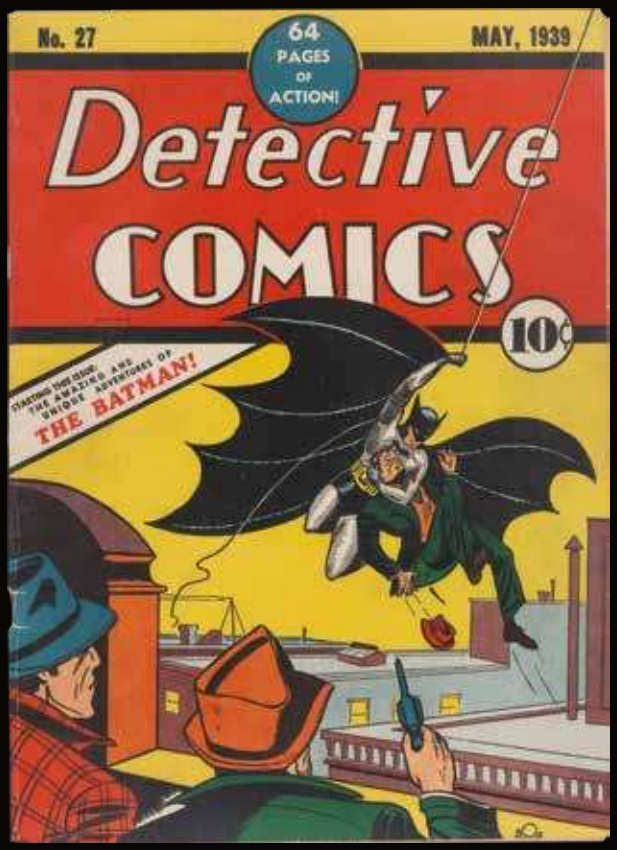
The Dark Knight Returns Book One, February 1986.
The comic that reinvented everything.
Frank Miller's game-changing deconstruction
of Batman, if not every hero.

Three of these covers apparently no longer exist. That makes Miller's *DKR*#1 cover uniquely worthy of a place in the world's finest museums or collections. It truly is history.

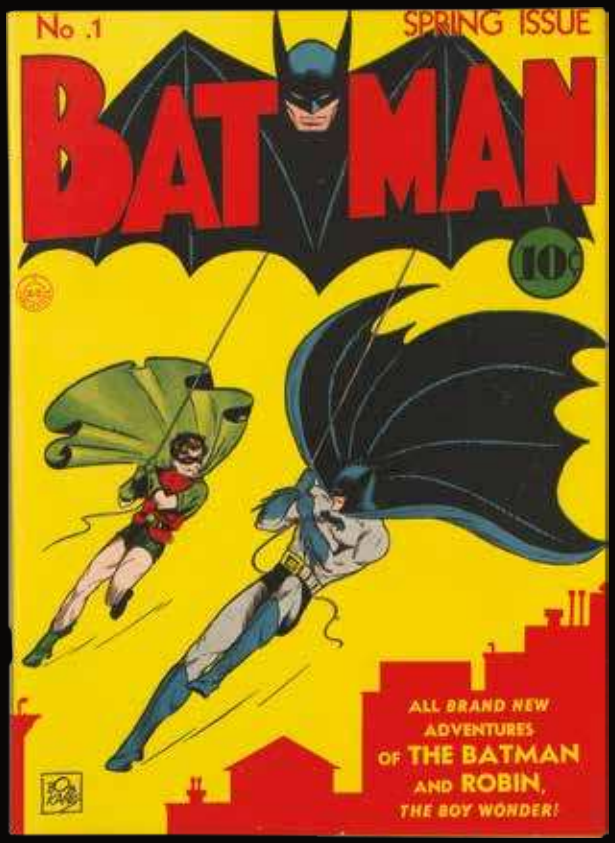
The importance of Frank Miller's work cannot be overstated. It impacted the success of our first dark and serious Batman movie in 1989, demonstrating in 1986 that graphic novels (now no longer just "comic books") and superheroes had grown up and were no longer merely children's entertainment. With thematic heft, adult tone and language and a breakthrough sophistication in graphic storytelling, *The Dark Knight Returns* showed the world that comics had matured and grown up with its readers. That paved the way for audiences the world over to accept our movies as adult fare.

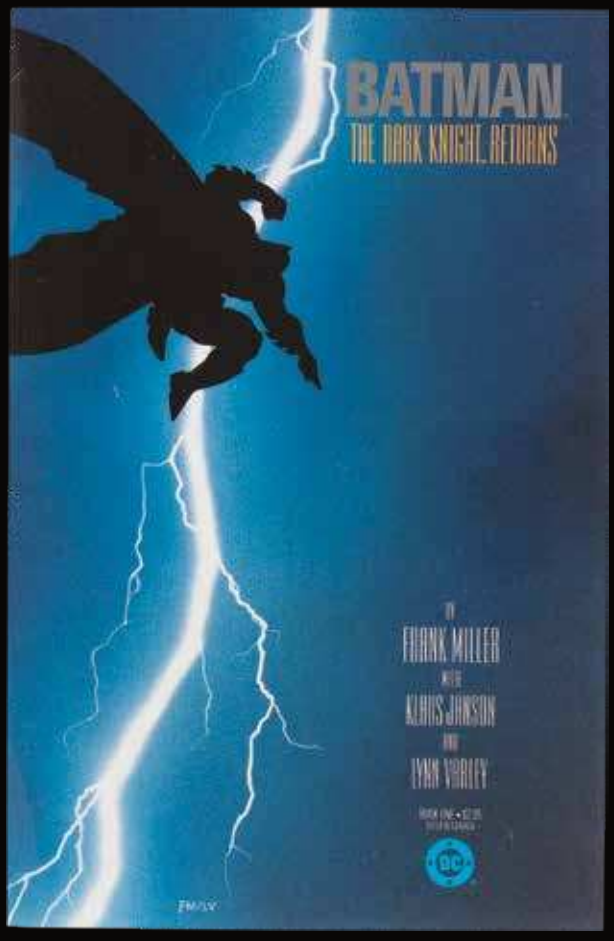
Artistically captivating, the cover of Book One proved to be one of the most iconic and instantly recognizable images ever rendered in comics. Suddenly, no longer was Batman the Caped Crusader. He was, again and forever, The Dark Knight.

Michael Uslan,
Originator and Executive Producer
of the Batman movie franchise


No. 27
64 PAGES OF ACTION!
MAY, 1939
Detective COMICS
10¢
THE BATMAN!


No. 38
Detective COMICS
APRIL
10¢
THE Sensational CHARACTER
FIND OF 1940
Robin
THE BOY WONDER


No .1
SPRING ISSUE
BATMAN
10¢
ALL BRAND NEW ADVENTURES OF THE BATMAN AND ROBIN, THE BOY WONDER!


BATMAN
THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS
FRANK MILLER
KLAUS JANSON
LYNN VARLEY

"IT WORKS": THE DARK KNIGHT SPEAKS
An Interview with Frank Miller

This interview with Frank Miller took place in New York City on April 26, 2022, only three days before his mentor, influence and dear friend Neal Adams died at the age of 80. Adams might have liberated Batman from the fuzzy, campy shackles of the 1950s and '60s, rendering him a tauter, tougher hero for the 1970s, but it was Miller who dragged Bruce Wayne's cape and cowl through the fetid gutters of New York City during the 1980s. Writers and artists ever since have been unable – or, more likely, unwilling – to wash out the stains. The Dark Knight returned and never again departed the printed page or flickering screen.

On a cool, damp Monday in a Manhattan that felt like Miller's Gotham City looked in 1986, Miller sat down to discuss not only the cover he created with Lynn Varley, but the origins and legacy of his work. Where once, long ago, he fretted about being forever tethered to Batman's cape, Miller today embraces the opportunity to discuss *The Dark Knight Returns* and all that it spawned. Because reading it 2022 is no less thrilling than it was in 1986, when college kids lined up at comic shops (!) to buy Miller's book and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*.

Of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller says now, "It just slapped the genre awake."

This catalog contains several essays by esteemed writers who have interpreted Miller's work, which has proved as invulnerable as Superman's skin and piercing as one of Oliver Queen's arrows. Here, instead, is the man himself – from 15 floors above New York City, drizzle falling, sirens blaring through open windows.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Heritage Auctions: You know, I'm fascinated by the fact that here we are, 37 years after you began work on *The Dark Knight Returns, a*nd Batman continues to live in your shadow. And I always wanted to know if you could have ever fathomed that in 1985.

Frank Miller: Oh, no way at all. I was just given an opportunity to, first off, find out what I could do with it and explore this character who had excited me since I was a little boy. But I felt like I was living in the shadow of, in particular, a mentor of mine, Neal Adams, and what the great comics in the 1940s and '50s had done with character. I guess I was determined to shake off some of the really, really cornball stuff that had been done with the TV show in the 1960s.

HA: Like Zebra Batman (who debuted in *Detective Comics* No. 275, in 1960).

FM: *Now* I think it's hilarious. When I approached *Dark Knight*, I was out there to make people take comic books very seriously and to entertain Batman very seriously. When I write a character and when I draw them, I take them seriously, and I immerse myself completely in them and hope that the reader comes along for the ride.

HA: Since its publication in 1986, there has been an awful lot of discussion about the politics of *The Dark Knight Returns*, and I often think that what gets missed is the art and beauty of the book. As you get into the character, as you get to know the psychology of Batman, how does that translate to the art? Because the art itself changes dramatically over the course of the four books, and was that intentional? You talk about Neal Adams, and the first time you see Batman in his full glory it's very much an homage to his Batman – full color, glorious. Then over the course of the four books, it becomes Frank Miller's Batman. How does that transformation occur?


No. 4
BAT MAN
WINTER ISSUE
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Detective COMICS
JAN. NO. 273
"The ZEBRA BATMAN!"
G-GET BACK, EVERYBODY! BATMAN HAS BECOME A MENACE!

FM: Well, it was very much an organic one. The first thing my lying mind wants to do is tell you about how clever I was to construct this evolution or what an intellectual exploration it was of the character. But, no, I was just finding my way and feeling what was going on. And I found myself more and more just looking to recreate the blocky, chunky father figure Batman that I'd grown up with, the one drawn by Dick Sprang of the 1950s, because it's because I didn't want Batman to be a fantasy of what I wanted to be.

My first thought in starting *Dark Knight* was that I was 29 years old and I was careening toward 30, which seemed frighteningly old. And I thought, well, if I'm going to make Batman, he's still got to be the father figure, so I'm going to make him impossibly old. So made him 50, but my version of 50 years old was, like, you know, just craggy wrinkles all over the place and a beat-up face and all of that. And what emerged was this, you know, there's this achy mythic figure.

And then he became squarer as the series continues, as I think the breakthrough shot for me was on the cover of the second *Dark Knight*, where I had the beat-up Dark Knight looking kind of like a cross between Batman and the Hulk. That process was very organic, a development of the character that took place over a longer time than DC it to because it took me a long time to do that book.

HA: The initial sketches of your Batman that we've seen over the years, which have been published in different places, he's thinner, more angular and a more familiar figure. Was there a moment when you found that breakthrough? Certainly *Ronin* impacts a lot of what Batman looked like. Had you had come straight from *Daredevil*, Batman may have looked considerably different in some ways.

FM: This, for me, has everything to do with *Dark Knight. Ronin* was me trying to embrace the comics of the world – first off, the Japanese manga. But beyond that, a collision of events was American comics opened up to European comics through the opening of the Forbidden Planet comics shop [in New York City], and also through to the invitation of Americans to the Lucca Comics & Games Festival [in Italy].

HA: And even Moebius was coming to Dallas for those comic cons in the 1980s and 1990s.

FM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I didn't meet him until L.A., but it was an amazing infusion of influences. The most overwhelming figure who had impact on me at the time was [Italian comic book creator] Hugo Pratt and meeting him personally. I'd been studying his work beforehand, and it started influencing me in *Ronin* and everything since, to this day.

HA: It's fascinating to hear an artist discuss the ways you can incorporate the myriad styles who impacted you. You go from Gil Kane and Steve Ditko and Neal Adams, then talk about the European artists, it's like a musician who finds their voice. You don't go to a bridge and for a year practice, you know, and play solos every day. You sit in your studio and you do the work.

FM: Yeah, but you've got to have the confidence to know that you can inculcate these various influences and not be lost within them. One of my heroes, Bob Dylan, once referred to himself as a musical expeditionary, and I've always liked that term and would like to think of myself as an artistic expeditionary. If it's out there, I'm going to hunt it down and look at it.

HA: Were you in Los Angeles during the process of writing *Dark Knight*?

FM: I started in New York and finished it in L.A.

HA: I was always under the impression that you needed to move away from New York to synthesize what you had learned from New York in order to make *Dark Knight* what it was.

FM: Yeah, well, my memory between real life and fictional life doesn't always line up exactly right. What I believe I said was that was that *Dark Knight* was a reaction to New York, that I had to see from a distance. That certainly was true. Some of the location work smacks of me doing it right from the street in the first chapter, but very soon after it took on such an abstract feel.

HA: Well, I mean, the fact is where you lived in Los Angeles wasn't all that different from parts of New York in that period anyway.

FM: This has been pointed out to me. I lived in downtown L.A. in the mid-1980s on Traction Avenue – or, as it has been pointed out to me, Skid Row. But I was able to find my first loft, a nice big space in a building full of artists. It was a really weird space. My bedroom was triangular, but it was big and industrial and was a very exciting place to live. I was there earthquakes and riots.

HA: What was your impetus for moving from New York to L.A.?

FM: There was a general restlessness and, you know, it was not the greatest time in New York. And on top of that, there was starting to be the Hollywood interest in things that I had worked on. And it all seemed like a new adventure.

HA: So let's talk a little bit about the cover. Am I correct that the artwork on the cover of *The Dark Knight Returns* trade paperback, featuring a Batman with among the skyscrapers, is the first version of the cover that you had intended to use for *Dark Knight Returns*?

FM: No, it was probably the fourth. The final was the lightning bolt.

HA: So it went through myriad iterations.

FM: Yeah. And as usual, when I'm really struggling with something, it's usually the simplest one that's the strongest. Just the idea of him striking like lightning as a, you know, as a force for justice was absolutely irresistible.

HA: How did you get away from iterations in which you saw Batman's face, you saw his eyes, you saw the most identifiable parts of Batman as opposed to rendering him in silhouette.

FM: Well, I was finding my identity as an artist. Once again, here's my sort of self-serving and slightly duplicitous mind at work, but I like to say that the silhouette is the most important language you have. What you can convey in silhouette is going to impact the minds and the emotions more intensely than anything else.

That's the really upscale answer. The downscale answer is … if you want a real nice rendering of something, I am not your guy. I'm just not good at it. But I can punch out a kick-ass silhouette.

HA: The first time we see Batman in the book, it's that beautiful homage to Neal Adams. That must have been tempting to show off. At the end of the day, you couldn't have gone with anything other than the cover you ultimately went with, but it must have been tempting to do something else, right?

FM: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, every chance I got, I did. Later I did on where he was

crouched on a power cable [which was used, among other places, as the cover to the 2015 collection *Batman Noir: The Dark Knight Returns*]. That was a real favorite of mine. It was nearly a silhouette. I love doing covers and I love conjuring iconic imagery. It's just a fun challenge.

HA: At what stage did you decide on the cover used for Book One of *The Dark Knight Returns*?

FM: If memory serves, that cover was designed after the first issue was penciled and while Klaus [Janson] was inking. … And I've got to say that the *Dark Knight* cover reproduced beautifully. I mean, one of the many wonderful things about having done *Ronin* is that is that Lynn and I learned a thousand lessons, and by doing something as simple as what we had with the lightning bolt, it essentially meant the printer had to get one thing right. And they got it right, and it made for a very powerful cover. Now the printers are capable of getting many more than one thing right, but the simplicity of the image served us better than anything else.

In the case of the lightning bolt, that really was a bolt out of the blue. Yeah. That was a moment of inspiration.

HA: What was your reaction when you finally saw it printed and saw that it had, in fact, lived up to the expectation that the two of you had for it?

FM: I can sum it up real simply. I simply picked it up and I showed it to Lynn and I said, "It works." I knew this thing was going to jump off the stands. The gamble was going to work, because it was simpler than anything else out there. And the image was – and I hate to say the pun – striking.

HA: Do remember the layout process and working with Lynn on the cover?

FM: On the lightning bolt cover, the procedure was simple. I composed it and, working within the board it was on, that positions everything so that the figure was going to be where I placed it. Then I inked the silhouette of the figure, then I drew a single pencil line indicating the staff of the lightning bolt, and handed it to her. No other notes. It just said "lightning."

HA: Did you know where the logo would go?

FM: Yeah, I had done a rough. I've got a brother, Steve Miller, who's an expert in such things. He's the one who drafted several of my logos, including S*in City* and *Hard Boiled*, and he picked out the type, which is called Empire, that the logo would be in. And I placed it where it would be.
HA: Do you remember the first time you saw one of the 532,000 imitations and parodies of that cover?

FM: I don't remember the first time.

HA: But when you started seeing them pop up over and over and over again, what did you think?

FM: It was hilarious. What else could I think? It became schtick.

HA: I know you never go back and re-read your old work, but I assume there are occasions – when, for instance, you are tackling another Batman story.
FM: Oh, then I do. Yeah, yeah. Revisiting it. I've got to read it again and then, you know, make sure what I've got in mind will work or else come up with some squirrely excuse to make it work. But to me going back and rereading my own material is, well, you know, there's no other way to put it. It strikes me as rather masturbatory.

HA: But when you do go back and reread it for work purposes, do you find different things in it? I don't ever assume that one wants to change anything, although there's certainly that temptation: *Why did I do this? I should have done this.* The work stands on its own. It certainly is impactful to generations. But when I go back and read it again, which I do often, I always find something new in it. Do you?

FM: Yeah. I find the work of a much younger man, and that's a many-sided experience. He made some mistakes, but he got some stuff right that that I've got to go back and remember and, you know, at the same time, it's boy, how come it took so long to get to that kid? And, boy, was I obsessed with that, you know, that sort of thing. But it's lessons through the positive and the negative. Yeah.

HA: Not only has your Batman informed the culture, but you continue to tell these stories in this universe, whether it's *Year One* or *The Golden Child* or *All-Star Batman* or the direct sequels. *The Dark Knight Returns* wound up becoming an ongoing narrative and an ongoing dialogue between you and Batman. And I'm utterly fascinated by that relationship, which surely you never could have imagined in 1985. What has that been like?

FM: It's been fun. [Laughs.] I don't mean to discount your question. I'm just saying that it started out as being this awesome project and then it turned into fun once humor crawled into it, once Carrie Kelley entered it [as Robin]. It became fun. And I realized I could do things like the Joker having these bizarro sort of like things that were halfway between

cherubs and thalidomide babies floating around and all the crazy political cartoonery that happened in *Dark Knight*. There was tremendous room for humor amidst all this grim *Sturm und Drang*.

Ultimately, every once in a while, I've had to sit back from my desk and go, "Frank, this is all ridiculous," and then jump back into it with complete conviction. I've quoted this line many times, but Richard Donner or whoever wrote the line advertising the first *Superman* movie saying, "You'll believe a man can fly" got it right. Because getting you to believe something utterly ridiculous is the essential job of the superhero cartoonist. But you're going to be told it with such conviction and with so much evidence that it's going to be as real to you as Mom and Dad.

HA: Was he real to you before you began working on him, as you began to provide him with his external and internal voices, is that when he becomes real to you? Or is it the longer you work on it, he become more real more tangible? I mean, this began as a project: Then-DC Comics President Jenette Kahn and editor Dick Giordano were very excited about and brought you in to do it – and then, at a certain point, Batman is Frank Miller and Frank Miller is Batman to a lot of people. And I sort of wonder when those things cross and when those things collide. Does that, in fact, change your perception of Batman and his potential and his meaning?

FM: OK, you're asking me was this real to me. Look, you're talking to a guy who cried when Gwen Stacy died. You know, this stuff, from early in my life, is very real to me. And then that guy grew up and got to do this for a living. And when I'm working on this stuff, it's real to me. It's real. Or it can be. I mean, I don't get up from it and feel all sad for the rest of the day because I wrote a scene that was, you know, kind of sad, because I'd be in a nuthouse if I did that. But I've got to write with the conviction that these moments are real, and the only way to do that is to have the *emotional* connection.

And when I go to the [conventions], I see that reflected in the faces of people who are talking to me about the stories that I worked on years ago. That bond that I just took as nerdy enthusiasm in the old days is now a precious one that has to be respected.

HA: When we began this interview, I said Batman lives in your shadow – the subsequent books, the movies, the fact DC doesn't market anything Batman-related without labeling him as The Dark Knight. Yours was the first Batman comic my son read. And I would love to know when you realized this was going to be the case. Because you certainly could not have imagined it in 1985 and 1986.

FM: I really appreciate it. I really do. I do have a memory, it has been within the last two years, and I don't know why this one particularly comes to mind. But I believe it was in Maryland where a father and son came up, and the son was the one who had a copy of *Dark Knight*, and it was the father who told me that it was his son's first Batman comic book. And it was just this really enchanting moment that sort of meant that this nonsense had a life.

HA: You talk about it being fun. And you mentioned at the beginning that Carrie, the book's Robin, is what made it fun for you. Can you talk to me a little bit about the inception of Carrie? When did you know that that was going to be Batman's Robin for this book?

FM: Oh, gee whiz. Well, the original version of *Dark Knight* had no Robin in it. I just thought there's no way I'm going to make him so corny. He's got this goofy little boy running around with him. I remember I was talking about *Dark Knight* to every single person I could, and I was riding on the bus with John Byrne on our way to the Mid-Ohio Con, which was basically comic book people helping raise money for the March of Dimes. And I was babbling about *Dark Knight* and trying to figure out

what to do about Robin, and he just drew his version of a girl being Robin. It was completely different, but the idea enchanted me, and it turned into Carrie eventually.

HA: So when John presents the idea of a female Robin, does that immediately click with you: *Well, that's so obvious*.

FM: Yeah.

HA: What was it about Carrie? I mean, she brings color to the book – a spark.

FM: The original Robin was a [Batman] replica, you know: His parents get murdered by criminals, so he'd been converted by that. And then I thought, now I'm going to have Carrie Kelley be this enchanting, absolutely happy kid. Her only problem is that she's got parents and everything. It's just that they're space cadets. They're neglectful parents just smoking pot all the time, and she's this genius kid. Then she essentially finds herself a cool substitute dad and runs away.

HA: I love the fact you talk about the fun of *Dark Knight Returns*. That's something I think that's so often overlooked when people talk about the book – that it's the grim, real, dirty, visceral Batman, and they neglect to mention how damned fun the book is.

FM: The older term for it is "romantic adventure." Right? This is about as realistic as *Star Wars*, and there are a lot of similarities between the two. We've got all kinds people who can do things that are impossible in our world and great forces of good and evil. And then with The Joker, you've got a character that accompanies Mephistopheles, for goodness sake. This is everything writ huge. This is opera. This is not *Taxi Driver*. And with Batman, I was given a chance at one of the big icons of comics history. And so eventually I put the other ones in it, too.

HA: Superman was not in the original version, correct?

FM: Not originally. Originally Batman died in a hail of gunfire right at the end of *Dark Knight*. That was my original first outline.

HA: Which brings us to Book Four – and the four-month gap between the third book's release and the final issue. I've always wondered: While you were wrapping the book, I assume you had read the work Alan Moore was doing on *Watchmen*. Did that inform the fourth book and the decision to bring Superman into the book so Batman could beat the shit out of him?

FM: That was always the plan from pretty early on. But I mean, Alan and I were talking a lot, and I think we were playing off each other a fair amount at that point in sort of like how we treat certain things. But once I decided to bring Superman in, my goal was to have Batman beat up Superman. Then it was how to make this happen, because I'm going to make you not like Superman, and then Batman's going to beat him.

HA: Philosophically, what was the meaning behind that?

FM: It was the bad boy beating up the good boy. I'd say the Superman in *Dark Knight* was not the Superman that I have done since or that the one I fell in love with. Everything was created in reaction to Batman and *Dark Knight*. And so Superman was very much a, well, there's no other way to put it: It was very much a Republican Superman. He even worked for Ronald Reagan. I was using him to show that Batman was not this archconservative, Dirty Harry type, that he was much more radical than that. And so it would be the conservative who had to bring him down.

HA: I've always been fascinated with how the politics of *Dark Knight* have always been such a huge part of the conversation around the book. This is a character we lived with for 80 years, and it always seemed to be that after that long you can impart anything you want onto that character as a reader and as a creator. Were you as fascinated by that discussion that began to pop up almost as soon as it was published?

FM: Aw, come on! Of course it would be great to say, "Of course I was." But I was doing everything I could to egg them on. [Laughs.] I've always been an attention-seeker, and a lot of the stuff in *Dark Knight* was to sort of like screaming to the world, "There's something happening over here!" and to shake things up.

HA: Are there things you can point to in the book that were just to mess with people?

FM: No, no, no. I was true to the story. I was true to my story. I don't mind provoking, but I wasn't going to all of the sudden have Batman throw a little kid out the window or something. Probably some of the stuff the Joker did, maybe like when he poisoned the cotton candy and stuff like that. You know, that's a big arch.

HA: *The Dark Knight Returns* served as a springboard for so many stories that followed – *The Dark Knight Strikes Back*, *The Dark Knight III: The Master Race*, *All-Star Batman, The Golden Child*, *The Last Crusade*. And before all of that, you went back to the very beginning of Bruce Wayne's story in *Batman: Year One*. When did you realize, well, this isn't going to be a one-off, now, is it?
FM: Well, there's a famous line, I don't know who said it, that is of great use to anybody with my job, which is: I made it up as I went along. Sometimes you just gotta admit you made it up as you went along. *Dark Knight* I did start to finish thinking, "This is it. This is conceived as something where you die at the end. *Batman: Year One* came from notes that I'd done just to warm up to do *Dark Knight*. I had this whole stack of notes that I'd written so that I could get into the head of the character. And I realized that I had a story there, and then the other ones have just sort of come along and finally gone by. It's just seems like you get drawn back to this stuff.

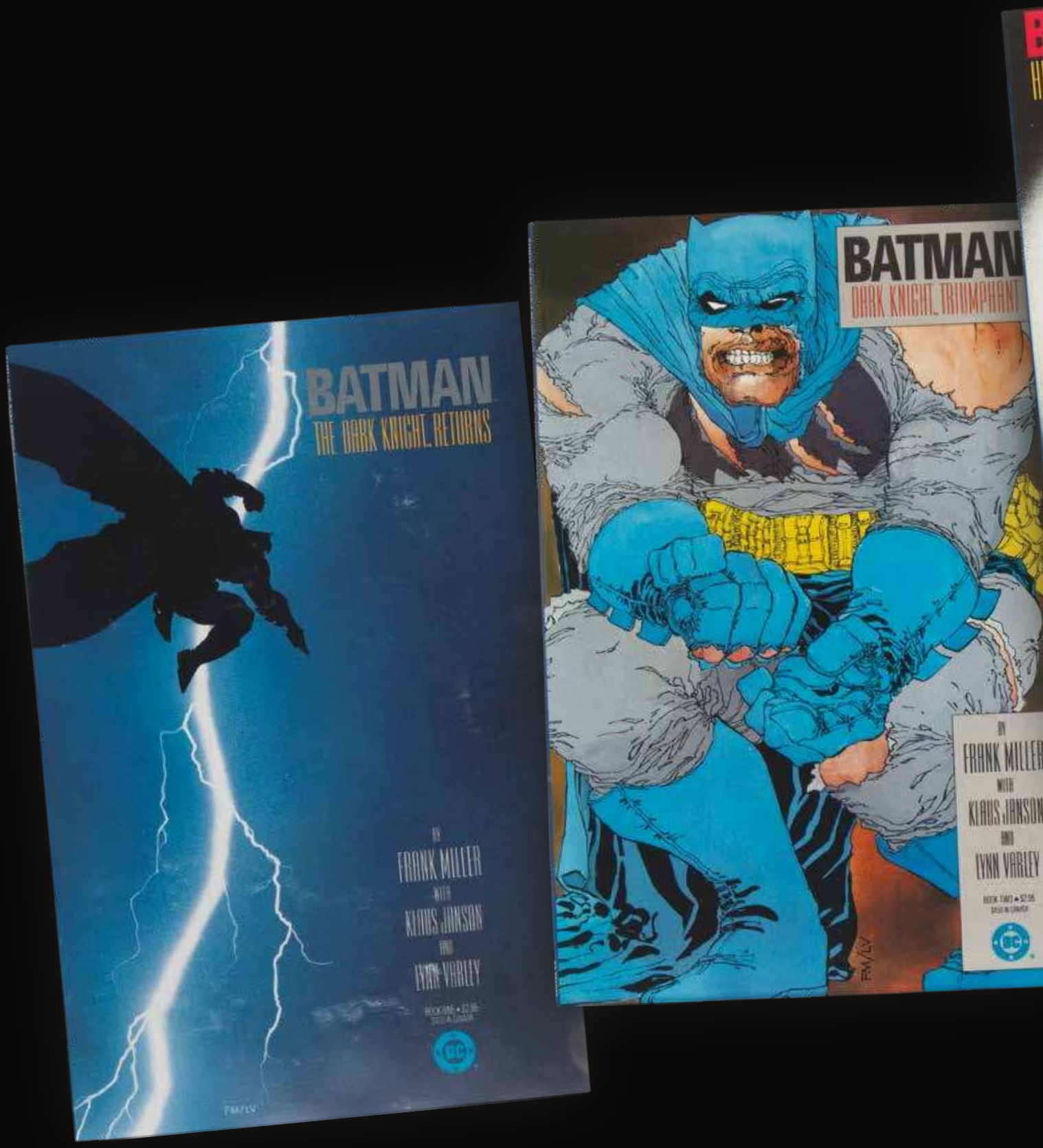
HA: Was there ever a reluctance to getting drawn back? Did you ever push back and say, well, I don't know about this? Or did you always feel like, yeah, I can and should revisit this world. It's funny – most people probably don't even realize *The Dark Knight Returns* wasn't the first time you'd worked on a Batman story. There was, of course, "Wanted: Santa Claus - Dead or Alive!" from *DC Special Series* No. 21 – in 1979!

FM: Well, if life were as planned as you imply, it wouldn't be worth living. Just when you think you've got nothing more to offer something, something might pop into your head. I am always thinking about the next job, and the next job tends to present itself, and you never know when that little bum is going to show up again and tell me that story. [Laughs.]

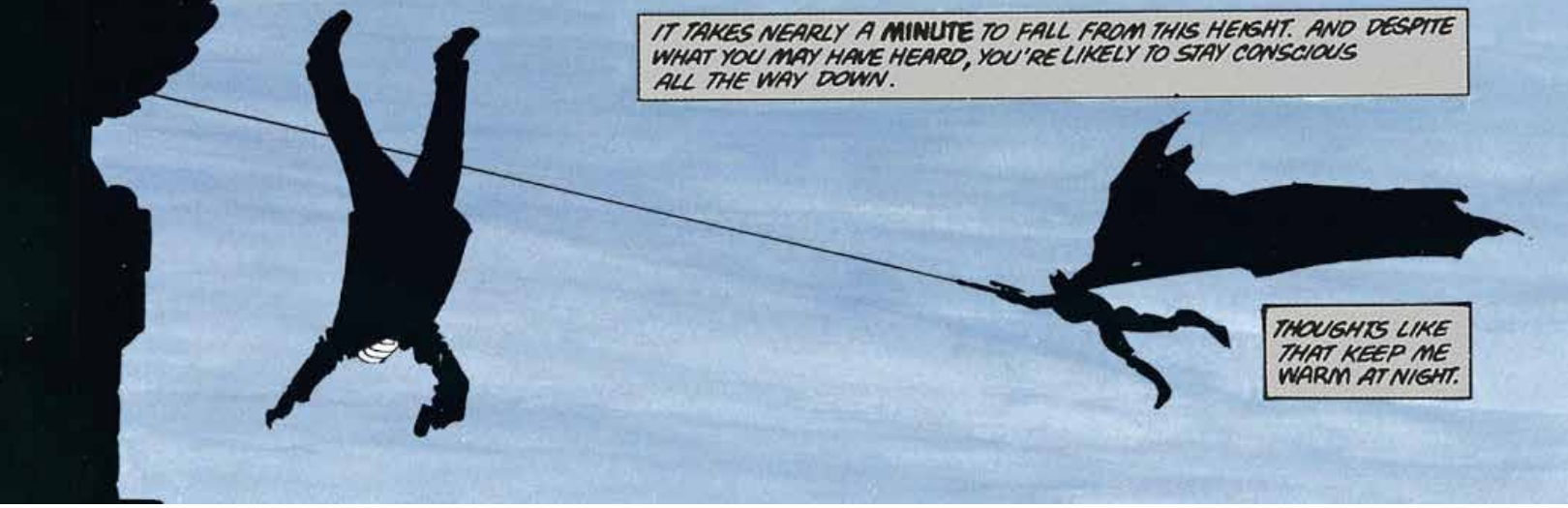
HA: Is that how it works? Is it less about I have a Batman story I want to tell and more about Batman has a story he wants me to tell? I don't mean for it to sound so metaphysical.

FM: I don't really know. It can be any number of things. It can be muse is upon me. ??? Or a client calls up and says, "You got any ideas for this?" and that gets me thinking about it, you know, because it's very easy for people with my job to act like we are the progenitors of all things. But the publishers have a huge role when comes to the preexisting characters, and a great deal does come from the publisher wanting to offer up an opportunity to jump in. A Superman book [*Superman: Year One*] came from [former DC Comics Co-Publisher] Dan DiDio asking me, if I felt like doing something with Superman. And I jumped at the chance, but I hadn't proposed anything.

HA: When you look back at *The Dark Knight Returns*, you know, it's a moment that completely transcends comics from that era. And the iconography that you created and the tone of that entire series has completely influenced everything, not only in comics but media, the films.


BATMAN
THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS
FRANK MILLER
KLAUS JANSON
LYNN VARLEY
BATMAN
DARK KNIGHT TRIUMPHANT
FRANK MILLER
LYNN VARLEY


BATMAN
THE DARK KNIGHT FALLS
BY
FRANK MILLER
WITH
KLAUS JANSON
AND
LYNN VARLEY
FM/LV
BATMAN
THE DARK KNIGHT FALLS
BY
FRANK MILLER
WITH
KLAUS JANSON
AND
LYNN VARLEY



FM: What *Dark Knight* did to superhero comics and the superhero genre itself, it was a big, fat Dope Slap. It just slapped the genre awake.

HA: When you first saw *Dark Knight* images in film and on television, how did you feel? And I mean from Tim Burton's *Batman* all the way to *The Batman*. Exact scenes are replicated. When you see that, do you think to yourself, "Yeah, I did that."

FM: No, no. I just wonder, "Where's my check?" [Laughs.] No, I know, it's OK. This is going to sound politic as all get out. But when I took on the job of working on Batman, I understood from the beginning that in every sense, I was contributing to a collective work and bringing my best to it. And as it was going along, and going very well, I expected I would see it popping up …

HA: Reflected back …

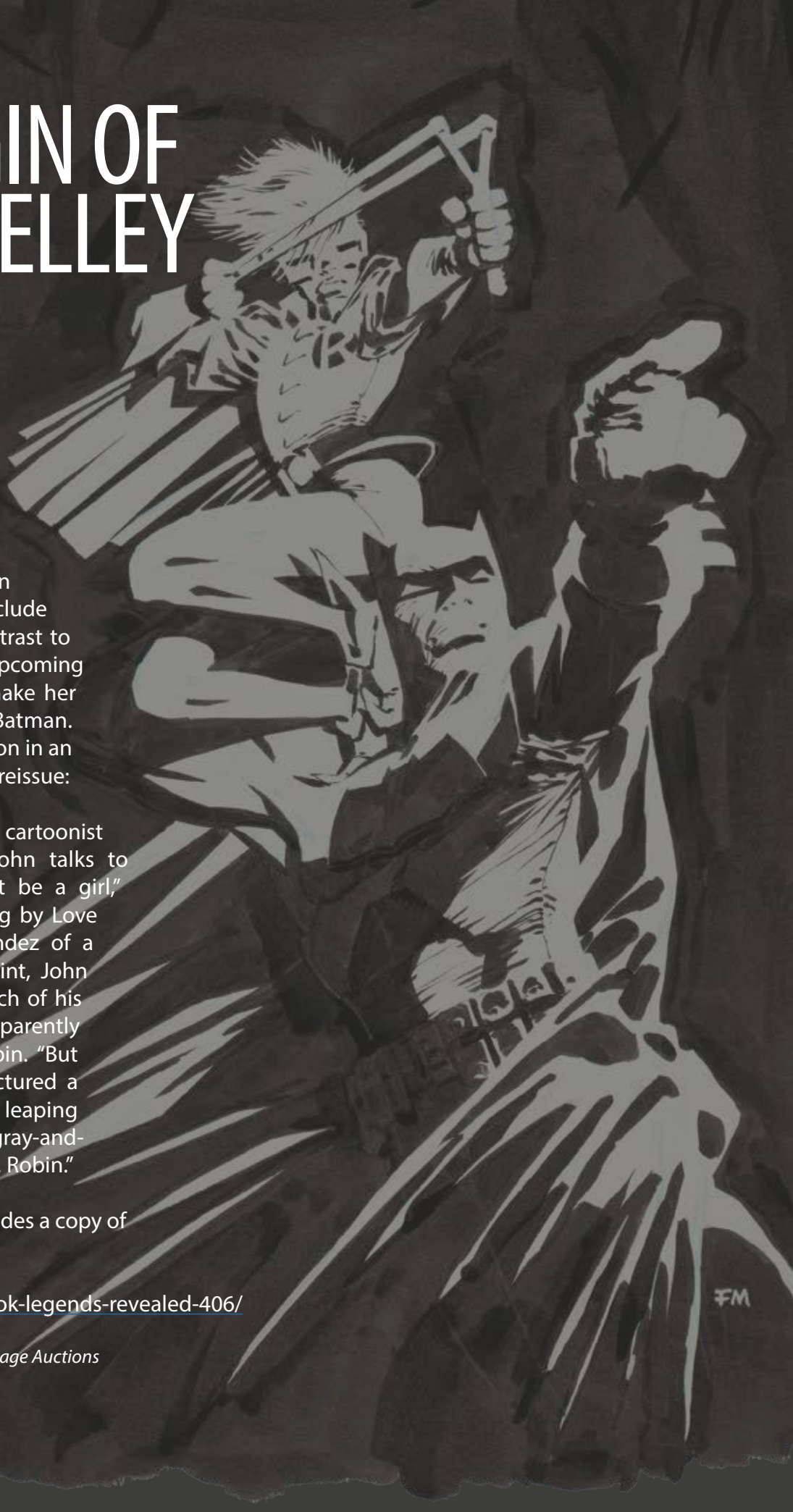
FM: Reflected back. I just didn't expect it *so damned much*. [Laughs.]

HA: And it doesn't stop. Every time I read a Batman comic now, I still think: Oh, Frank Miller did that … in 1986!

FM: I look at *Dark Knight* now and I think of what I said when I first saw the lightning bolt cover, which is: *It works*. That's a remark not just about the cover but about the celebration of the heroic and about how there's something to this comic book fare. And we gotta keep at it.

Photos of Frank Miller and the Dark Knight Returns artwork were taken by Heritage Auctions on April 26, 2022, in our New York office, during his interview about "The Dark Knight Returns" Book One cover.

THE ORIGIN OF CARRIE KELLEY



Long before Carrie Kelley was conceived by Frank Miller, Jaime Hernandez (of *Love and Rockets* comic fame) drew his character Maggie Chascarrillo as Robin for *The Comics Journal* in 1982. And because of Miller's eventual interaction on a plane with acclaimed writer-artist John Byrne, Frank Miller decided to include a brightly colored Robin in contrast to Batman's dark gray in his then upcoming *The Dark Knight Returns,* and make her the first female sidekick to Batman. Miller described that conversation in an introduction to his book's 1996 reissue:

"In 1985 at 30,000 feet I talk to cartoonist John Byrne about Batman. John talks to me about Robin. "Robin must be a girl," he says. He mentions a drawing by Love & Rockets artist Jaime Hernandez of a female Robin. To prove his point, John provides me with a pencil sketch of his own. At the time, Miller was apparently not even planning to use Robin. "But then," he wrote, "one day, I pictured a little bundle of bright colors leaping over buildings, dwarfed by a gray-and-black giant…and there she was. Robin."

CBR covers it here and also includes a copy of the image Jaime drew.

https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-406/

***Angie Wood**, Comic Art Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

THE IMPACT OF BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

My first read through of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* took place about a decade after its initial release in 1996 during my freshman year of high school. I saw the anniversary paperback at my local comic shop and would spend the weekend diving into the series I had heard so much about. With most of my knowledge of Batman at the time coming from the animated series, and the blockbuster movies-- I expected something a bit lighter, "campier" but gothic, and instead was fed a wild futuristic tale laced with plucky savagery that caught me off guard, but also captivated me… especially when it came to Carrie Kelley.

There she was, about 20 pages or so into the first chapter and again in the "Triumphant" chapter, which laid out the notion that this young girl had so much admiration for the Dark Knight, that she would eventually buy a Robin suit and sort of cosplay her way into winning him over. What nestled in my fangirl heart then and still holds so much of it now, is that Carrie upset the idea of what a sidekick should be. From the get go, Carrie acts in a way that sets her apart from previous Robins, and proves just how fearless she is. She wasn't an orphaned child who needed looking after, rather she sought out the cantankerous Caped Crusader and pursued the role of Robin after being saved by him. And as the story went on, she would repay that favor and save Bruce's life. Armed with her Girl Scout knowledge and audacious virtue, Carrie succeeded where others hadn't, by inspiring Bruce to become the hero he once was.

When I think about it now, up until that point in the Batman mythos, the women in Bruce's life had mainly been adoring fans, villains, love interests, or had stood in as mother figures, but in Carrie he found a partner, and I found a story that toyed with the idea that this teenager could stand as an equal with Batman. Carrie was resolute-- an unconventional girl who is never played as a victim, making her story an exceptionally progressive addition in DC Comics, and for its female readers.

For a whole generation of fans, myself included, who came to know the foreboding side of superhero comics through *The Dark Knight Returns*, we witnessed Carrie go toe-to toe with not only maniacal mutants, but against the Joker, and Superman, making Carrie one of the most forceful females without actual superpowers introduced by any DC imprint. And although Carrie Kelley was the first female Robin, she isn't portrayed as such and when she took to the streets with Batman in her incomparably cool green shaded glasses and pixie hairdo waving in the wind, she reshaped the silhouette and hearts of sidekicks forever.

As a final note, I'd be remiss to leave out that after years of training alongside the Bat, that Carrie Kelley would eventually go from being his sidekick to taking over the cape and cowl when Frank Miller returned to his iconic *Dark Knight Returns* series in 2015. In Miller's "The Master Race" Issue 9, Carrie's transformation is completed when she becomes the hero she was always meant to be… she becomes Batwoman, making her arc a full-circle and one of the best success stories in all of DC.

As Bruce himself says of Carrie in the final pages of *The Dark Knight III: The Master Race,* "So much intelligence. So much potential. So much I can learn from her…"

Angie Wood, *Comic Art Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

THE FEMINIST MANIFESTO OF FRANK MILLER'S "DARK KNIGHT"

Once an idea has wormed its way into the communal dream-stream, it becomes nobody's choice and anybody's guess as to where an inspiration may strike. Among those of us who dealt in the comic books' superhero genre of the 1980s, that bothersome idea involves an anti-heroic concept, applied to costumed protagonists who might be the Good Guys but who do not necessarily act the part. It also can signify an assertion of resourceful, inclusive feminism in an idiom that historically has objectified its women characters.

The decisive eruption of that notion came in 1986 with Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* project—a four-volume revisionist-*Batman* phenomenon that was followed presently by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* serial, both from DC Comics. Moore and Garry Leach had done likewise in 1984 in Great Britain with a *Marvelman* revival, which reached the U.S. in 1985 as *Miracleman*, foreshadowing the *Dark Knight* watershed of 1986.

In a coincidental development during this period, the writer-artist Timothy Truman suggested to me a collaboration to flesh out a masked-vigilante concept he called *Prowler*. Tim envisioned an ill-tempered fellow, by now in his 70s or 80s, who had lashed out during the Depression-into-wartime years against the criminal element—but who had long since retired into embittered seclusion. Provoked by the return of an early-day antagonist, this Leo "Prowler" Kragg would conscript a young martial-arts athlete to help him mount a return to ferocious form. Tim's attachment at the time to Eclipse Comics (publisher of the imported *Miracleman* stories) assured our *Prowler* serial of a prominent outlet.

Truman and I also harbored a fondness for the Gothic attitude that artist Neal Adams and author Dennis O'Neil had applied during the 1970s to *Batman*, and to their angry-young-man tales of *Green Lantern & Green Arrow*. Tim distilled our collaborative vision with this observation: "If superheroes should exist in real life, they'd be the kind of people with whom you wouldn't want to get onto an elevator."

An overriding element had as much to do with a current of feministic heroism that distinguishes Miller's *Dark Knight* books—the transformation of Batman's juvenile sidekick, Robin the Boy Wonder, into a teenage girl of grit and gumption. This Carrie Kelley character would prove to be the comics industry's strongest assertion of womanly determination since William Moulton Marston's invention of the *Wonder Woman* comics franchise in 1941.

Marston explained his strong-woman narrative bearings in a 1943 essay for *The American Scholar* magazine: "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power… Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman." Marston, a psychologist and inventor, had absorbed publisher M.C. Gaines' theory of comics as an instructive medium.

Marston hardly had been the first to produce such a character: Will Eisner and Samuel M. "Jerry" Iger had introduced the heroic Sheena Rivington, "Queen of the Jungle," in 1938, equipping her with a male companion, Bob Reynolds, who seems chronically in need of rescuing. Here was a practical gender-role reversal of the close-in-time Superman/Lois Lane relationship, although DC Comics' *Superman* factory would take occasional pains over the long term to present Lois Lane as a resourceful and self-sufficient working journalist.

Unlike Marston's over-intellectualized explanation for the feministic essence of the *Wonder Woman* stories, the more progressive writers of a next generation would apply such an attitude without boasting of their liberated sensibilities. The depiction of DC Comics' Black Canary during the 1970s (by Dennis O'Neil in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, and by Len Wein in *Justice League*) is a striking instance of the search for equality among champions.

For *Dark Knight*, Frank Miller simply presented Carrie Kelley as a determined youngster who fulfills a need, heedless of gender biases. (Unenlightened bystanders mistake the new Robin for a boy, presuming that no girl-child could act with such rambunctious audacity.) Miller had begun building toward the development of such womanly strengths with his *Daredevil/Elektra* stories of the earlier 1980s (with Bill Sienkiewicz). Miller would amplify the interest during the 1990s with the female-ensemble characters of his *Sin City* books.

Miller's *Dark Knight* appeared shortly after Timothy Truman and I had begun developing our *Prowler* project with fellow artists John K. Snyder, III, and Graham Nolan. We all read Miller avidly and compared notes accordingly. Difficult to say to what extent *The Dark Knight* must have influenced *Prowler*, for the characters are essentially unalike except for the vigilante crime-busting impulse—which owes more to the pulp-fiction prose tradition (exemplified by Street & Smith Publications' *The Shadow*), than to comic-book narrative grammar. Tim and I followed our 10-issue run of *Prowler* stories with a 1990 revival of a Depression Era pulp-hero franchise, *The Spider*, also at Eclipse Comics.

By no coincidence, Truman and I also had equipped our *Prowler* character with a leading lady, a crime journalist named Geraldine Crane, who developed into a self-possessed seeker of trouble who proved less in need of rescuing than she was determined to give Leo "Prowler" Kragg a run for his money at his own

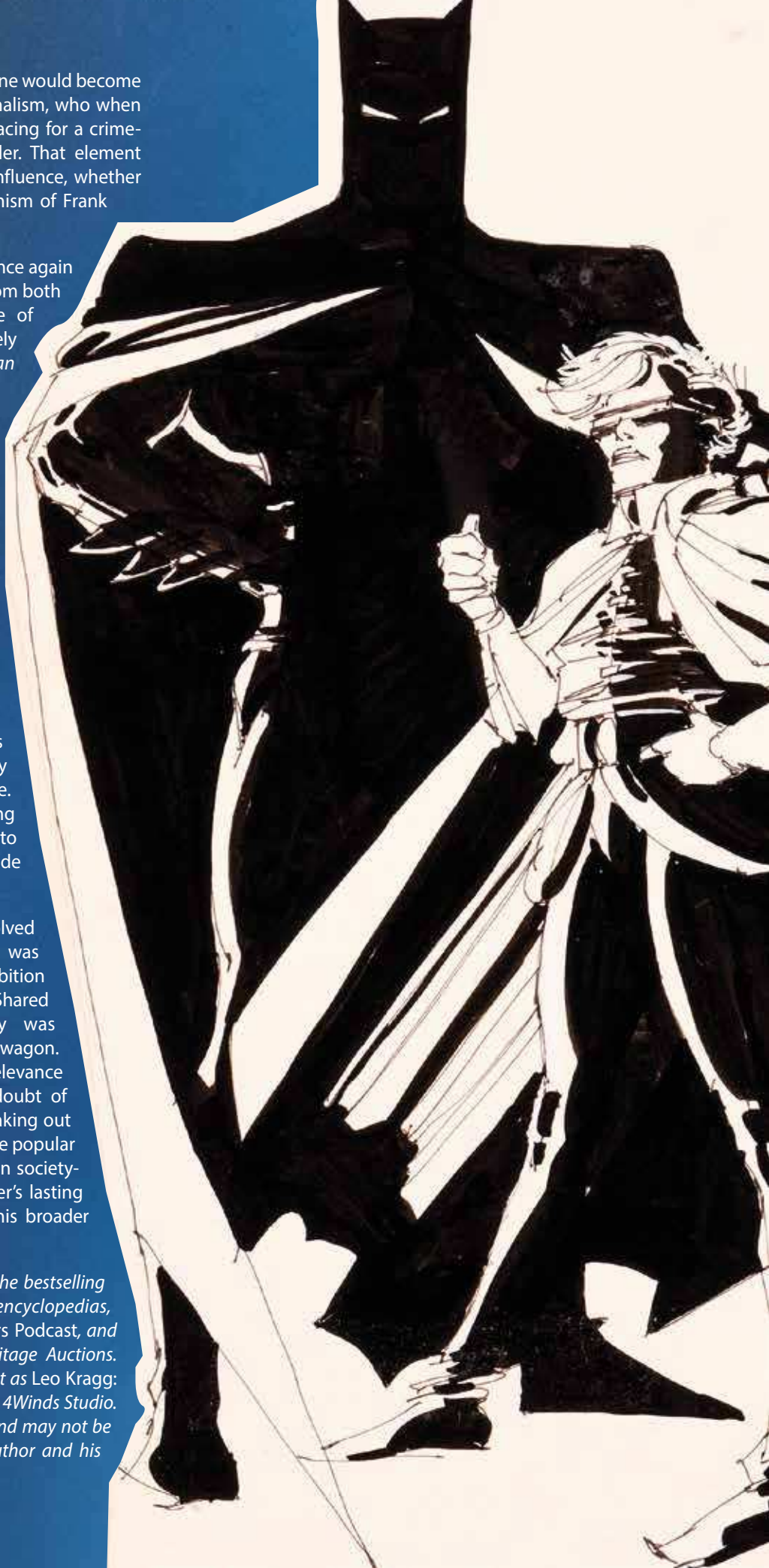
game. In our broader story-arc, Geraldine Crane would become a Pulitzer Medalist-turned-professor of journalism, who when last seen in the modern-day setting was bracing for a crime-fighting reunion with the now-aged Prowler. That element of character development owes a debt of influence, whether subliminal or overt, to the unaffected feminism of Frank Miller's vision of Carrie "Robin" Kelley.

The Dark Knight also made Hollywood safe once again for *Batman*: Miller had freed the character from both the unintentionally high-camp stereotype of two 1940s *Batman* serials and the deliberately campy hokum of the mid-1960s' *Batman* teleseries.

Yes, and no sooner had Tim Burton's new filming of *Batman* proved a hit in 1989, than the Old Hollywood actor and comic-book enthusiast Roddy McDowall approached 20th Century-Fox Studios with a proposal to adapt the *Prowler* series as a star vehicle for himself. At age 61, McDowall intended to impersonate the aged-but-vigorous Leo "Prowler" Kragg. I delivered a story treatment at McDowall's behest, only to encounter an age-discrimination bias: Fox was interested only in Truman's and my subordinate concept of a college-kid counterpart of the Prowler. To McDowall's chagrin, some officious studio functionary advised us: "Lose the geezer," quote/unquote. Timothy Truman and I replied that the last thing we wanted was to see our vision corrupted into a *Karate Kid* knockoff. We let the prospect slide into oblivion.

In the final resolve, for all who were involved with that period of superhero evolution, it was a heady time of adventure and hopeful ambition and imaginative creativity for its own sake. Shared subject-matter notwithstanding, nobody was trying to climb aboard anybody else's bandwagon. Hindsight leaves no doubt of the persistent relevance of Miller's *Dark Knight*. Nor is there any doubt of Miller's generosity of spirit and artistry in staking out a plateau of the decade's upheavals within the popular culture. The industry-at-large, not to mention society-at-large, can only be grateful for Frank Miller's lasting reinvention of an essential character and his broader orbit.

Michael H. Price *is the founding author of the bestselling* Forgotten Horrors *line of film-history encyclopedias, co-host of the long-running* Forgotten Horrors Podcast, *and a curatorial comics-art cataloguer with Heritage Auctions. Price's collaborative* Prowler *comics are in print as* Leo Kragg: Prowler, *Vols. I and II, from Cremo Studios and 4Winds Studio.*



BATMAN: NOVELTY VS. NOIR

Batman has his roots in the Pulp action/adventure genre. He was dark, dangerous, and hard on crime. He played rough and was not shy about killing the bad guys without a shrug or a blink. In fact, in his first appearance in Detective Comics #27 he knocks a criminal off a catwalk into a vat of acid! (Things like this happened a lot more often than you would think in Gotham City.) He would occasionally use a gun and just shoot someone. And he wasn't too concerned if someone got caught in a rope and hung by the neck under the Bat-Plane. This is a Batman you didn't trifle with. In just his first 10 appearances, Batman had in some way been responsible for the death of the criminal 5 times. That's a 50% kill-rate!

Just a scant year later, it was decided that he needed a youthful sidekick so younger readers would "have someone to identify with" in his stories. This effort to lighten him up with the wisecracking Robin would lead to less dark and serious stories and lend itself to more kitsch and hijinks. In the 1940s, "Giant Props" became a staple of the stories… giant typewriters, cash registers, playing cards, coins, etc… and, therefore, part of the mythos. Gimmicks, gadgets, and gee-gaws became more and more outlandish.

After the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite, it seemed that Batman fought as many aliens as criminals. In fact, by the end of the decade, he was in space about as much as he was on Earth. By the early years of the 1960s, things had gotten very far afield from the early crime-fighting days of Batman. Then in 1966 "Batmania" swept the nation with the launch of the TV Batman series. It aired during Prime-Time on Wednesday and Thursday (as a two-parter) and introduced millions of people to who Batman was. As much as this series did to make Batman a household word, it would eventually be the **POW!** that gave comics yet another black eye. The over-the-top camp and goofiness of the show was funny and charming, but implanted the idea in the public's mind that all comic books were like this also. This idea was very hard to dislodge, and the general public did not take comic books as serious entertainment for a long time.

Over the next couple of decades, editors, writers, and artists for DC Comics would make several attempts to make the comic stories more serious and aimed at more mature readers. DC's "Relevant" period of approximately 1968-1972 included some fantastic stories and art for Batman, and Green Lantern/Green Arrow, from Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams. Then in the late 1970s, Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers gave us the "Joker Fish" saga in *Detective Comics*. It's notable that in both of these story arcs the creators attempted to make the Joker much more dangerous and unstable.

However, with constant after-school re-runs of the live-action TV Batman, several different Batman animated series and even his appearances on *Super Friends* would keep Batman's *Biff!*Boff!*Pow!* image in the mind of the general public. Cesar Romero was still "The Joker" to most Americans.

Frank Miller's T*he Dark Knight Returns* not only firmly returned Batman to his gritty noir roots, it also gave readers a version of the Joker that was far more deadly and unstable than any they had seen before. The impact on the comic industry was immense. And it enabled the creation of the darker *Batman* movie starring Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson. We likely would not have really any of the superhero films of today if it had not been for Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*.

Weldon Adams, *Comic Art Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

In 1989, the year of Tim Burton's first *Batman* film, I began working at Lone Star Comics, a retail chain in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. One day, while I was manning the register at the main Lone Star location in Arlington, a customer came in I knew from a previous job. He was eight years older than me, but we had been good friends as we shared a lot of common interests, including rock music and old horror and science fiction movies. I had absolutely no idea he cared anything about comic books, as I rarely discussed my interest in them with "civilians" (admitting you liked comics during the 1980s was basically like saying you were a child or hopelessly brain damaged), but there he was, checking out the new issues—it was great catching up with him, and we had a lot of laughs over the old days. Better yet, we struck up a (now lifelong) friendship and discovered we had something else in common: "funny books."

He had grown up reading *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, and other Marvel staples, but, like many fans who reached adulthood and became distracted by cars, girls, bills, and the like, he abandoned them. However, in 1986 he read a review of *The Dark Knight Returns* in *Rolling Stone* magazine, and it drew him back in. Not only did he purchase each issue of the groundbreaking, four-part series, he began collecting again in earnest, purchasing Marvels he had grown up reading and even buying new issues of such DC titles as *Justice League* and *Superman*.

His story is hardly unique. Not only did *The Dark Knight Returns*, a grim, gritty alternate future story of a grizzled, almost fascistic Bruce Wayne coming out of retirement to be Batman again, attract many people to comic books who had never read them before, it also brought many lapsed readers back into the fold.

The Dark Knight Returns took an aging Caped Crusader back to his 1939 roots

The Dark Knight Returns took an aging Caped Crusader back to his 1939 roots (more or less) as a grim avenger of the night, as opposed to the sci-fi stuff published in the '50s or the campy Batman inspired by the Adam West TV show of the late 1960s. Miller was clearly influenced by manga, especially in terms of panel flow and dynamic page layouts. Other creators, such as writer Dennis O'Neil and artist Neal Adams, had treated Batman seriously, but *The Dark Knight Returns* garnered much more mainstream attention. Plus, it was published in a prestige format, with each issue costing $2.95, which was about four times as much as a standard comic book.

DC Comics printed 125,000 copies of that first issue. According to then-DC Comics Executive Vice President Paul Levitz (writing for 13thdimension.com), this was a huge gamble as *Ronin*, Frank Miller's prestige format project from three years before, had a first-issue print run of around 87,000.

"If we were wrong, we could actually lose money on the project," Levitz wrote.

It turns out that DC was indeed wrong, but in the other direction. They had printed far too few copies as the issue quickly sold out and stores were putting in heavy re-orders.

"It was good news," Levitz wrote, "EXCEPT we hadn't done a second printing of a comic for decades. I think the last may have been the Batman 3-D comic magazine in the '60s fad, or it may even have been one of the earliest Superman titles in the Golden Age. All long before comic shops and serious collectors. So, there was a real debate around the room about whether we should print more. Were we going to be unfair to collectors who had bought second, or multiple, copies in hope of appreciation? They were an appreciable portion

of our audience at the time, we thought. If we didn't, were we going to lose out on the biggest opportunity DC had since the comic shop market began? Sounds silly now, but then it was a serious conversation."

Of course, DC printed more. In fact, they did four printings of that first issue for a total of approximately 400,000 copies. To appease collectors, they labeled subsequent printings as such in the indicia, making first printings more desirable and ultimately worth more in the collector's market.

Levitz recalled, "[This was] a massive number for an expensive book (our regular titles were 75 cents), an emerging market (that was around the time comic shops would pass the newsstand in sales), and a publisher that was a distant No. 2."

Calling the phenomenon "unforgettable," Levitz further explained that strong sales were just one aspect of the wide-ranging influence of *The Dark Knight Returns*: "It was just the beginning. The trade editions would really change the field, establishing the graphic novel format in America (along with *Watchmen* and *Maus*)."

Today, it's easy to see the influence of *The Dark Knight Returns* not only on the graphic novel format, but also on the comic book industry as a whole. It's had a huge impact on movies, TV shows, and the culture in general as well.

Brett Weiss, *Video Games Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

A BATMAN TIMELINE 1939-1986

1939 Detective Comics #27 feature the 1st appearance of Batman and Commissioner Gordon by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Soon thereafter, Jerry Robinson is hired as Kane's first assistant. Gardner Fox is the first writer after Finger to write Batman, authoring Detective Comics #29 through 34. Detective Comics #31 is noted for its classic cover, first appearances of Julie Madison (Bruce's fiancé), the Monk (first costumed villain), the batgyro(sic) and the baterang(sic). Bill Finger writes the two-page origin of Batman in Detective Comics #33, introducing us to Martha and Thomas Wayne.

1940 Hugo Strange debuts in Detective Comics #36. Detective Comics #38 introduces Robin, the Boy Wonder, setting the pattern for many Golden Age heroes to have a young sidekick. Batman #1 appears on the stand and features the first appearance of the Joker and the Cat (later Catwoman). Joker and Catwoman appear in the same story in Batman #3. They do not team-up but it is the first time two major villains appear in the same story. George Roussos joins Kane's studio, inking backgrounds. Jack Burnley joins DC and begins working on Batman.

1941 Scarecrow debuts in the pages of World's Finest Comics #3. The "powerful roadster" is called the Batmobile for the first time in Detective Comics #48. A bat-head is placed on the front of the Batmobile by Batman #5. The Penguin pops up for the first time in Detective Comics #58. Fear of Bob Kane being drafted prompts DC to hire Dick Sprang to build an inventory of stories.

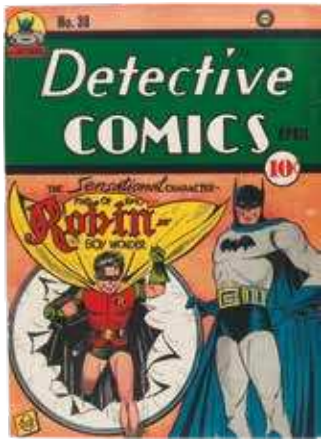
1942 The Bat Signal shines for the first time in Detective Comics #60. The origin and first of appearance of Two-Face (Harvey Kent) is in Detective Comics #66. His name was later changed to Harvey Dent to not confuse readers with Clark Kent. Batman's first science-fiction story is in Batman #10. These would become a staple from 1958 to 1964 after the launch of Sputnik. Batman #12 features Batman's Hall of Trophies, a precursor to the Batcave as well as Jerry Robinson's first penciled story. Several new writers come on board. Edmond Hamilton pens his first Batman. Don Cameron begins scripting for Batman until his death in 1954. Alvin Schwartz starts writing for Batman, leaving DC in 1958.

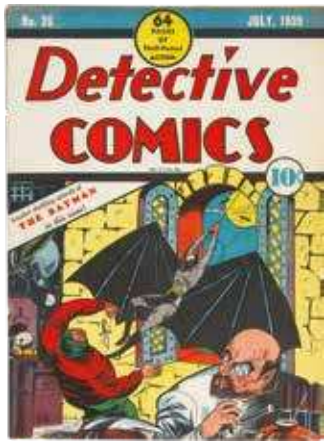
1943 Batman newspaper strip begins. Kane works exclusively on the strip does most of them. With Bob Kane on the newspaper strip and the war well underway, DC feels he is not going to be drafted and begins printing the backlog of Dick Sprang stories beginning with four in Batman #19. Batman appears on the big screen in a 15-part serial starring Lewis Wilson and Douglas Croft. Make way for Alfred as he debuts in Batman #16. Brothers Tweedledum & Tweedledee and Cavalier first appear in Detective Comics #74 and 81 respectively.

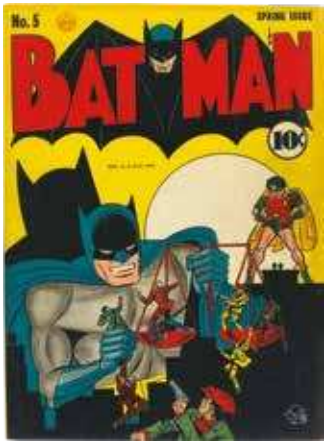
1944 The Batcave, makes its debut in Detective Comics #83. The story also provided a reason for Alfred's weight loss and the growth of a mustache to look like the Alfred of the 15 Chapter serial. He gets his own feature from Batman #22 through #36 by Jerry Robinson. The first appearance of Professor Carter Nichols is in Batman #24, sending Batman and Robin to ancient Rome on their first time-travel adventure.

1945 Win Mortimer begins working on Batman.

1946 Batman steers the Batboat for the first time in Detective Comics #110. Jerry Robinson's last Batman work appears in Batman #37. Lew Sayre Schwartz becomes Kane chief ghost. Jack Burnley's brother Ray begins inking Bob Kane. Batman gets the first of his easily identifiable trophies when he takes home the giant mechanical dinosaur from "Dinosaur Island" in Batman #35. Jim Mooney also joins the Batman team with his first work appearing in Batman #38.







1947 Robin begins his solo run in Star Spangled Comics #65. It will run until the end of the title, #130. The second of Batman's easy to spot trophies comes from World's Finest Comics #30, "The Penny Plunderers".

1948 First full origin on Batman. Bob Kane provides the cover and art for Batman #47. First time the killer of Martha and Thomas is revealed as Joe Chill. Riddler makes his only two Golden Age appearances in Detective Comics #140 and 142.

1949 First appearance of the Mad Hatter and Vicki Vale in Batman #49.

1950 First appearance of Deadshot in Batman #59. Batman get new Batmobile (Batman #61) and new Batplane (Detective Comics #156). We learn the origin of Catwoman in Batman #62.

1951 Killer Moth debuts in Batman #63. Origin of Joker revealed (Detective Comics #168). Batman gets a Bat-Copter in Detective Comics #171.

1952 Curt Swan takes pen to paper and creates his first Batman story for Batman #70 as well as illustrating the first Batman/Superman team-up story in Superman #76.

1953 Sheldon Moldoff replaces Lew Sayre Schwartz as Bob Kane's chief ghost and remains so until Kane leaves comics in 1968.

1954 Catwoman (Detective Comics #211) and Two-Face (Batman #81) make their final appearances for over a decade, pushed aside by the new Comics Code Authority. The Bat-Marine first surfaces in Batman #86. World's Finest Comics is reduced to 32 pages. Batman and Superman begin team-up adventures with issue #71. Curt Swan tapped to illustrate the first seven stories before a long stretch of Dick Sprang issues.

1955 Ace the Bat-Hound first sniffs his way into adventure in Batman #92.

1956 Batman's origin expands as we learn the that famed detective Harvey Harris taught young Bruce Wayne, disguised in a Robin-like outfit, the tricks of the trade in Detective Comics #226. Origin and first appearance of Batwoman is in Detective Comics #233. Adding further to the Batman mythos, Bruce discovers an old family film of his father Thomas Wayne dressed in an almost identical Batman costume in Detective Comics #235. The Bat-Tank rumbles its way onto the scene in Detective Comics #236. Arnold Drake writes his first Batman story in Batman #98.

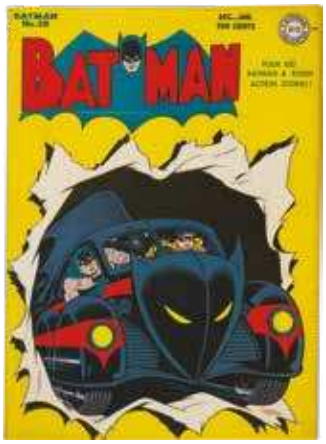
1957 Erstwhile mad scientist Professor Milo makes his debut in Detective Comics #247.

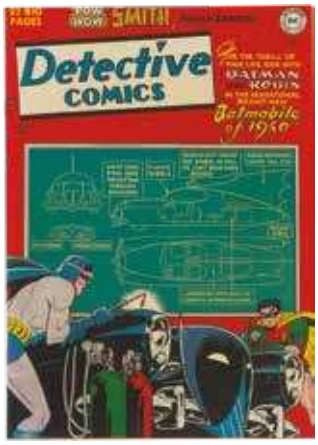
1958 Science-fiction, specifically alien stories begin to dominate the Batman Universe. The Terrible Trio thrill readers in their debut appearance in Detective Comics #253. Yet another bat device, the Whirly-Bat, a one-man helicopter, flies on to the pages of Detective Comics #257. Set your date for trouble as Calendar Man makes his debut in Detective Comics #259.

1959 Bat-Mite begins his impish ways in Detective Comics #267. Mr. Zero first set his sights on Batman in issue #121, later changing his name to Mr. Freeze, matching the name the 1966 TV show had given him.

1960 The first-time circulation figures are released in Batman #129. The average circulation per issue in 1959 is 502,000. The first appearance of Kite-Man in Batman #133, coinciding with Dick Sprang last work in the title.

1961 Matt Hagen finds the pool that turns him into Clayface in Detective Comics #298.





1962 Dick Sprang's last new Batman story appears in Detective Comics #308.

1963 The first book-length story in title occurs in Batman #153.

1964 New Look debuts in the May Detective Comics #327 coinciding with Batman's 25th anniversary. Julius Schwartz is tasked with reviving Batman's flagging sales by working the same magic he had by modernizing Flash, Green Lantern, Justice League of America, Atom and Hawkman. He now edits Batman and Detective Comics while editor Mort Weisinger takes over World's Finest Comics. Carmine Infantino becomes the first artist to do a Batman story without having it signed by Bob Kane. Gone is the giant bubble model of the Batmobile, replaced by a more traditional sports car. The first book-length story in Detective Comics is #331.

1965 Producer William Dozier picks up several comics at the airport while waiting for his flight. Among them is Batman #171, around which the Batman TV show pilot would be based.

1966 Batman's biggest year to date. The Batman TV show debuts January 12th and sends sales of Batman over the one million mark. Toys, cards, premiums of all sorts are sold and given away. Bat-Mania sweeps the country. Poison Ivy debuts in Batman #181. Catwoman makes her return after a 12- year absence in Superman's Girl Friend Lois Lane #70, 71.

1967 The Batman TV show decides they are going to make Batman a little sexier by adding a Batgirl next season. Batgirl's debut in Detective Comics #359 comes out before Batgirl's TV debut. By the end of the year, we have the first team-up of Batgirl and Robin in Detective Comics #369.

1968 The TV Batmobile first appears in Detective Comics #371 and on the cover of Detective Comics #375. Neal Adams illustrates his first story with Batman in World's Finest Comics #174. Later that year he begins his run of team-up stories with Brave and the Bold #79. Firmly believing Batman is a creature of the night, he only draws Batman appearing in night scenes, regardless of what the script says. Bob Kane is bought out of his Batman contract for $1,000,000, $50,000 per year for 20 years. Credits for creators appear immediately. Frank Robbins begins writing Batman with Batman #204/Detective Comics #378. Irv Novick becomes regular artist with Batman #204. Bob Brown becomes the regular artist beginning with Detective Comics #378.

1969 We learn Alfred's last name is Pennyworth and he has a daughter named Daphne in Batman #216. Moving away from the 'camp' Batman craze, editor Julius Schwartz shakes things up by sending Robin off to college, Batman closes down Wayne Manor and the Batcave and moves into a downtown penthouse in Batman #217/ Detective Comics #393.

1970 Neal Adams does his first Batman solo story in Detective Comics #395. The Man-Bat's first appearance makes Detective Comics #400 a tough get for a collector. The mysterious League of Assassins first appears in Detective Comics #405. Batman is dropped as regular team-up partner in World's Finest Comics with issue #198.

1971 Daughter of the Demon, Talia first appears in Detective Comics #411 followed quickly by Ra's Al Ghul debut in Batman #232. Denny O'Neil's master villain, daughter and League of Assassins haunt Batman to this day. Thanks to the loosening of the Comics Code, disfigured nemesis Two-Face makes his first appearance since 1954 in Batman #234. Jim Aparo draws his first Batman story in Brave and the Bold #98. Frank Robbins illustrates his first Batman story in Detective Comics #416.

1972 After peaking around one million in sale at the height of Bat-Mania, Batman sales drop to an average of 185,283 according to the circulation statement in Batman #238.

1973 Batman returns as regular team-up partner in World's Finest Comics #215. Joker returns to his homicidal ways in the classic "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge!" in Batman #251. Archie Goodwin begins a brief but spectacular run as editor on Detective Comics #437 to 443.

1974 Bumbling Gotham detective Lt. Harvey Bullock makes his first appearance in Detective Comics #441.

1975 Science-fiction writer David Vern return to writing comics with Batman #267.

1976 The Batman origin expands again with "There Is No Hope in Crime Alley" and the introduction of Dr. Leslie Thompkins as the woman who finds Bruce at the murder scene and helps him navigate this tragedy.

1977 Steve Englehart's classic eight issue run in Detective Comics #469-476. Introduced are Dr. Phosphorus, corrupt politician Rupert Thorne and Bruce Wayne love-interest Silver Sinclair. Reintroduced is Hugo Strange and Deadshot. And his classic Joker Fish story in #475, 476 cemented forever the homicidal craziness that is the Joker.

1978 Clayface III (Preston Payne) oozes on to the pages of Detective Comics #477.

1979 Lucius Fox makes his debut in Batman #307.

1980 Frank Miller draws his first Batman story in DC Special Series #21.

1981 Catwoman starts her brief solo career with stories in the back of Batman #332.

1982 According to Batman #343, Batman average sales are 108,234.

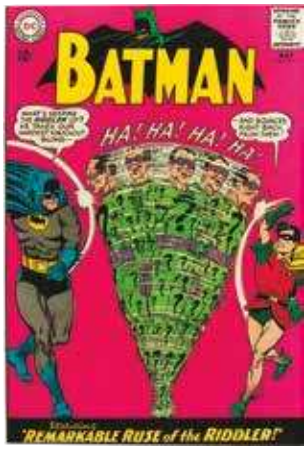
1983 Killer Croc begins making his way into Batman's life in Detective Comics #523. Jason Todd and family make their brief debut in Batman #357. Outside of a couple of flashbacks, Batman no longer takes part in Justice League adventures. Brave and the Bold cease publication at #200.

1984 Dick Grayson gives up his role as Robin in New Teen Titans #39. Jason Todd takes over as the new Robin in Batman #368. Dick Grayson takes up the role of Nightwing in Tales of the New Teen Titans #44.

1985 Black Mask starts creating havoc in Batman #386.

1986 World's Finest Comics ceases publication. Batman is kicked out of the Outsiders. Batman #391 reports average sales for Batman at 89,747. Slumping sales reduce Batman stories to only two titles, Batman and Detective Comics for the first time since 1940. Frank Miller releases Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1.

Jerry Stephan, *Comics Specialist, Heritage Auctions*



BATMAN: THE GENESIS

Bob Kane, with generous support by his friend Bill Finger, created one the most recognizable comics characters the world has ever seen, Batman. In 1936, after a brief stint at the Fleischer Studios and selling a few gags, fellow DeWitt High School classmate Will Eisner told Bob there was work to be found at Jerry Iger's comic, *Wow, What a Magazine!* Bob's first comic work was on Hiram Hick. He also created Peter Pup, which was published in the UK and later reprinted in *Jumbo Comics*. Bob produced other equally memorable strips used by DC such as *Ginger Snap*, *Oscar the Gumshoe*, and *Professor Doolittle* before trying his hand at an adventure strip when he created *Rusty and His Pals* for *Adventure Comics*.

Editor Whitney Ellsworth liked Bob's work on Rusty and the other adventure strip he had created, *Clip Carson*. One Friday, Ellsworth told Kane they were looking for other strips like their popular *Superman*. Ellsworth also told Kane that Siegel and Shuster were making $800 a week, apiece. Bob was only earning $30 to $50. Bob told Whit he'd have something by Monday.

Bill Finger graduated from DeWitt High school in 1933. The hopes his parents had of Bill becoming a doctor were dashed by the Depression. Bill took odd jobs but always held out hope he would be a writer, not the shoe salesman he had become. In the late '30s, Bill happened to meet Bob Kane at a party. They discovered they had the same taste in movies and books, and Bill talked of his desire to write. Bob was having trouble writing and keeping up with his art chores on *Rusty* and asked Bill if he would like to take a crack at it. Bob and Bill also created *Clip Carson* and Bill was able to reduce his hours as a shoe salesman.

On the weekend of Batman's creation, Bob had gone home and banged out several sketches but was satisfied with none of them. His best idea was a man in red tights, wearing a domino mask, and donning what appeared to be two bat-like wings and the name "Bat-Man" written underneath.

Bob called Bill and said he had some crude drawings for a new character and asked Bill if he'd like to come over and help him flesh it out. As Bob states in his biography *Batman and Me*, in a rare moment of candor,

> "Bill said, 'Why not make him look more like a bat and put a hood on him, and take the eyeballs out and just put slits for eyes to make him look more mysterious.' Bill said the costume was too bright: 'Color it dark gray to make it look more ominous.'"

Bob also wrote that Bill further suggested that instead of stiff wings, Bat-Man should wear a scalloped cape that looked like wings when they fluttered and he should wear gloves so he wouldn't leave any finger-prints. Naturally, Bob asked Bill if he wanted to write for the feature and Bill jumped at the chance.

Monday came and DC had its next hit feature, thanks to Bob Kane with Bill Finger.

Jerry Stephan, *Comics Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

A MARVEL LOYALIST COMES AROUND

Up until Dark Knight, I had grown up a Marvel loyalist. Mainly due to the dystopian tales surrounding the X-Men and their related mutant titles, but also to the back alley grit of Daredevil comics. I would pick up occasional issues of *New Teen Titans* and follow the spectacle of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, but outside of that, I largely affiliated DC comics with Saturday morning cartoon kiddie stuff like *Superfriends* and Adam West's schlocky (but beloved) Batman series. *The Dark Knight Returns* changed all of that.

The street-level drama of the Devil of Hell's Kitchen was my first introduction to the creative team of Frank Miller and Klaus Janson. An appropriate setup for their apocalyptic take on Gotham. Miller's approach was a revelation as his drafting hand bobbed and weaved through an unconventional 16-panel grid layout like a prizefighter at the top of his game. The script-filled mini panels that dominated the pages of the prestige format book gave extra weight to Miller's dramatic splash pages when they would pop up like a punctuating knockout punch. It was cinematic in a way I had never seen in a comic.

My young brain noted that Batman was taking on a gang of upstart criminals called "Mutants". I saw it as a not-so-subtle metaphor of DC's Golden Age veteran at war with the X-Men, who were the top-selling comics in the industry at the time. In the story, Batman defeats the Mutant leader and takes command of the Mutant army. Miller's Dark Knight had a similar impact in the comic shops, setting a new bar for mature comics, which the entire industry seemed to follow. There was a lot of hype surrounding this bold new take on Batman. For years, Marvel had been outpacing DC on the dark and dirty hot take on heroes. With this graphic novel, that all changed, setting in motion a seismic shift in all of the comics that came after its release, as a barrage of imitators were vying for the same magic Miller had unleashed in his dystopian-noir-crime tale.

The ominous themes of Cold War tension hovered throughout the story as the old US/USSR rivalry was starting to wind down in the real world of the late '80s. With those same tensions bubbling up again 35 years later, the story has a renewed sense of relevancy far beyond its original release date. If you swap out Reagan for modern political leaders and Corto Maltese with Ukraine, this comic could have come out last month and not seem the least bit out of place with the present-day world order.

Miller broke from the monthly soap opera trope that defined comics and transformed the two-dimensional superhero into a fully fleshed-out three-dimensional character study that touches on Batman's heroic merit in equal measure with his flawed hubris. Bruce Wayne is portrayed facing his inner demons and confronting his sense of relevancy in a world that has moved on from him. This was a defining character moment for the Dark Knight, but also a deep dive into the symbiotic relationship with the Joker that would define their rivalry in the following decades.

From my perspective the comics industry went through puberty with *Dark Knight Returns* and transitioned into a fully formed adult on the other side setting the stage for other landmark DC book's such as *Watchmen* and *Sandman* along with the slew of titles associated with the Vertigo imprint which would flourish for decades after. That influence was felt far beyond DC as Marvel and indie publishers injected grit and character depth across their titles with mixed results, rarely finding the perfect balance Miller was able to achieve with his magnum opus.

Mwanza Dover, *Comics Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

THE DARK KNIGHT DISCOVERED IN 2022

I have a confession to make – I have not read *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.* That is, up until today. I grew up a Marvel fan, and as most comic fans know, older readers can be classified as either Marvel or DC. Growing up in the '70s and '80s, I loved the Hulk, read Spider-Man at the barber shop with my dad, and even went to my first comic book store to buy a copy of *Amazing Spider-Man* #252 with the first appearance of the black costume. I am a Marvel fan through-and-through, raised on the characters created by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and other Marvel Comics creators that brought the heroes I loved to life.

So, I didn't know much about DC. Oh, I had seen Superman movies, and heard of Batman and Wonder Woman, but never read the comics. As I got older, I didn't discover DC as many do… I read some, including John Byrne's reboot of *The Man of Steel*, and eventually *The Death of Superman* and Batman *Knightfall,* but I was all about the growing independent comic scene and rise of Image Comics. I had become an aspiring artist and was really drawn to the dynamic images of the new artists. But like comic artists of the early '90s, many of my influences were based on the comics I read as a kid – Byrne, John Buscema, Arthur Adams. As I grew as an artist, I gained a greater appreciation for creators with whom I wasn't as familiar… including Frank Miller.

I knew Miller's work…on *Daredevil, Wolverine,* and *Batman*…but I wasn't very familiar with it. I would hear about how he influenced countless writers and artists, setting the stage for the darker, more adult-oriented comics of the late '80s-early '90s, but I was more familiar with his later *Sin City* art. I thought it was "cool", but he didn't affect me as much as other titles of the time.

Let's jump ahead to today…after working as a freelance artist, with some professional comic work under my belt, I found myself at Heritage Auctions, which happens to be the ideal place for me to utilize all the knowledge I acquired over the years of comic conventions and associating with all different types of artists. When we recently acquired the iconic cover to *Batman: The Dark Knight*, I had to face the reality that I had never read the book which influenced so many of my co-workers and friends. It was finally time to see what all the "buzz" was all about.

First, let me say that I was aware of the storyline, having heard about the book for 30+ years. But I wasn't aware of the unique way Frank Miller presented the story. From Page One, the panel layout and storytelling was unlike most comics I have read…again, being a fan of early '90s comics, I was used to dynamic breakout panels and splash page compositions… Miller "controlled" the pages! His use of panel size dictated how the story flowed – small panels, up to as many as 16 on a page, slowed the story to focus the narrative, and larger panels were used to accentuate the size and scope. He created a pacing that was perhaps better than I had ever seen. Reading the book was a journey, and Miller took you through with a purposeful mastery.

The other aspect that impressed me was the dark, gritty nature of the story. *The Dark Knight Returns* is considered (with *Watchmen*) a flashpoint which began the "Dark Age of Comics", a time when companies started moving away from the lighter, more wholesome heroes that fans were used to and opening the door to darker, more conflicted anti-heroes that blurred the lines between right and wrong. The critical success of *Dark Knight* led Miller to continue the hard edge storytelling with *Daredevil* "Born Again" and *Batman: Year One*, moving the industry into more adult topics and initiating a surge of older readers back to comics.

Not only was the comics industry reinvigorated, the success of Miller's *Batman* also led directly to Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989, a blockbuster film that dramatically veered away from the campy Batman that most people were familiar with from the Batman TV show. This was a movie that is seen by many as a precursor to the current success of comic movies. *Dark Knight* truly sparked a movement toward a much more serious tone in comics and pop culture that would shape the current landscape we see today.

Reading *Dark Knight* and thinking back to some of the comics that influenced me – *The Punisher*, *The Crow,* even the "Kraven's Last Hunt" storyline that ran through Marvel's Spider-Man titles in 1987, I can now see how these might never have existed if not for the success of Miller's re-emergence of an aged vigilante trying to take back the night from the evil that had infested his city – a story told so brilliantly that generations would site the series as one of the best ever told. And now, I believe I can be included in that group.

Adam Braun, *Comic Art Specialist, Heritage Auctions*

1986: A YEAR OF CHANGE

The year 1986 was an exceptional year of creativity, innovation, and change for the comic industry. We, the kids of Batmania were growing up and needed something more substantial and meaningful to satiate our comic appetites. At the time, I was in Dallas, Texas, and had just become a manager for one of the top comic shops in the country, and was heavily invested in the Uncanny X-Men, as were most of my friends and customers. Their books were among the hottest, most innovative titles in the industry. The series was being written by Chris Claremont, and the Marvel mutants were a big reason that Marvel had surpassed DC for the #1 comic company in America.

We all knew that Frank Miller's new Bat-comic was coming, as the advertising blitz for the book was practically inescapable, and we were very enticed by the new images of Miller's gritty, square-jawed hero of the night, but in late June, when the highly anticipated *The Dark Knight Returns* hit the comic store shelves, all of our comic collecting lives were turned upside-down. The hard-hitting, noir-esque superhero story was more intense than anything we had previously seen, and it was exactly what we had been looking for to replace the campy superheroes popularized by the 1966 TV Batman TV show. We now had something palpable, confident, and gutsy to fill that void. We knew that the comic world was about to change.

Greg Holman,
Comics Specialist, Heritage Auctions

1989 – A MEMORABLE MOVIE

As far back as I can remember I've been a Batman fan. In 1989 my aunt was babysitting me for the evening. Unexpectedly, her then boyfriend (now husband) stopped by for an impromptu date night. With my 4-year old self in tow, the two took me to see *Batman* starring Michael Keaton, Jack Nicholson, and Kim Basinger. The movie is a bit of a blur, but I do remember the emotions I felt, a combination of excitement, adventure, and sheer joy.

After watching Batman triumph over the Joker, I returned home with my aunt to a shocking scene – several police cars surrounding my home! It turned out that my aunt didn't tell my mother that she had taken me to the movies, and in a panic my mother called the NYCPD! After Mom screamed at my aunt for what seemed like an eternity, I blurted, "Look, Mom, I'm Batman!" to which she indignantly directed to my aunt, "Now look what you've done!"

It's a memory that would not have been possible without the movie's precursor, the groundbreaking comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* with its attendant artwork by Frank Miller, particularly the cover of the first issue. We all have our own "origin story" and seeing this spectacular work of comic art in person reminds me how I was first drawn to comics as a passion and eventual career.

Ryan Mundaca,
Comics Specialist, Heritage Auctions

BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT AND THE MOVIES

The short version: Batman movies as we know them probably wouldn't exist if it weren't for *The Dark Knight Returns*.

TDKR had a major cultural impact when it arrived in comic book shops in 1986. Much like the concurrent *Watchmen* and subsequent *Batman: The Killing Joke*, it was a high-profile comic book marketed more to adults than children, it expanded readership, and brought a darker feel to a market traditionally viewed as juvenile.

Its grim, almost nihilistic interpretation of Batman achieved the seemingly impossible by sweeping away the campy image that had lingered since the 1960s, and in doing so opened the door for a more mature version on screens big and small. It was an uphill battle to get across that threshold, though.

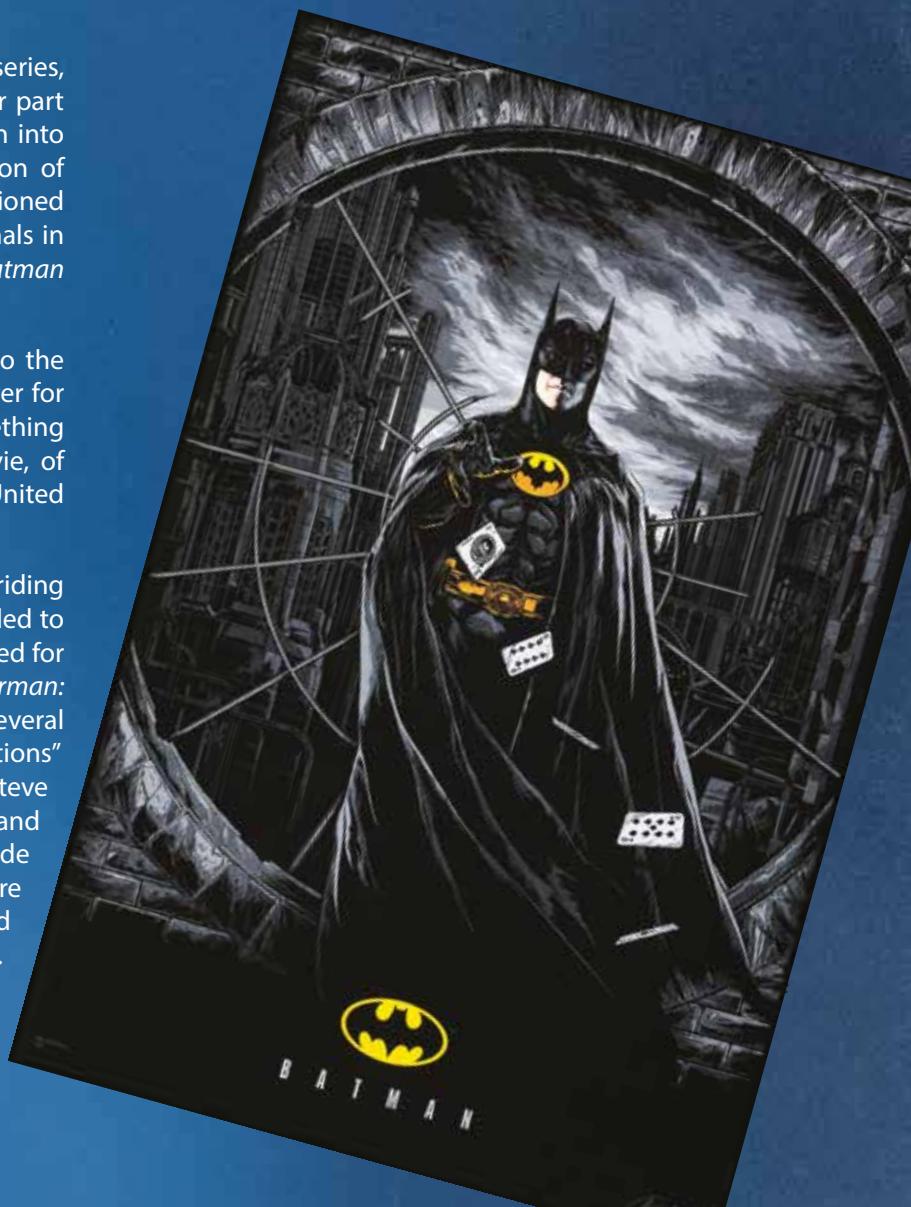
Prior to the arrival of Frank Miller's now iconic miniseries, film producer Michael E. Uslan had spent the better part of a decade trying to get a gritty version of Batman into movie theaters. "The definitive, dark, serious version of Batman, the way Bob Kane and Bill Finger had envisioned him in 1939. A creature of the night; stalking criminals in the shadows," as he once said in an interview with *Batman on Film*.

Alas, the Caped Crusader's star had faded thanks to the campy '60s TV series that had redefined the character for many, and few could rectify that image with something pulpier. CBS wanted a *Batman in Outer Space* movie, of all things. Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures, United Artists, and other studios turned down his pitches.

The project gained traction when Warner Bros., riding high on the success of their *Superman* movies, decided to expand their superhero portfolio. However, they opted for a script titled *The Batman* by Tom Mankiewicz (*Superman: The Movie*, *Superman II*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, and several James Bond movies), inspired by the "Strange Apparitions" storyline (*Detective Comics* #469-479) by writers Steve Englehart and Len Wein with artists Walt Simonson and Marshall Rogers, the latter of whom was to provide concept art for the movie. The film was to feature origin stories for Batman and Robin, the Joker and crime boss Rupert Thorne as its villains, and Silver St. Cloud as the love interest.

Mankiewicz envisioned an unknown actor for Batman, but aimed high for the rest of the cast, up to and including William Holden as Commissioner Gordon, David Niven as Alfred, and Peter O'Toole as a version of the Penguin with elements of Mr. Freeze thrown in. Both Holden and Niven had died by the time the movie was greenlighted in 1983, crushing that particular dream.

The Batman was given a Spring/Summer 1985 release date and a budget of $20 million. Nine rewrites were performed by just as many writers, most of them also based upon *Strange Apparitions*, but Mankiewicz's script dominated the production, attracting the likes of Ivan Reitman (*Ghostbusters*), Joe Dante (*Gremlins*), and even Wes Craven (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) to direct. (Fun fact: Reitman wanted to cast Bill Murray as Batman and Eddie Murphy as Robin.)



project floundered and, as is often the case with film production, the intended release date came and went. But the success of *The Dark Knight Returns* and also *Batman: The Killing Joke* rekindled Warner Bros. interest in a Batman movie, and made them a little more willing to take risks.

The studio had scored a surprise box office and critical hit with *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, the first feature-length film directed by a then-unknown Tim Burton, whose ability to make a profitable crowd-pleaser on a low budget caught the studio's eye. Burton was not a comic book fan, but was intrigued by the tone of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Mankiewicz's script was still in play, but Burton instead opted to write a story treatment with his girlfriend, Julie Hickson. He then tapped Sam Hamm (*Never Cry Wolf*) to write the screenplay.

Warner Bros. was pleased with the script but hesitant to take a chance with it. That changed when: 1) a bootlegged draft circulated among fans and was received with praise; and 2) Burton's second movie, *Beetlejuice*, was another surprise hit, ultimately scoring $75 million on a $15 million budget in 1988. *Batman* was given the greenlight to begin pre-production on the heels of *Beetlejuice*'s $8 million opening weekend.

Burton and Hamm proved to be the ideal pairing for the movie, finding the middle ground between the diametrically opposed tribes of Bat-fandom - the old guard who were nostalgic for the campiness of the 1950s and much of the '60s, and a younger crowd who preferred the more serious tone that had since crept in. Burton's dark sense of humor and surreal, Gothic-meets- Art Deco aesthetic meshed with the grim themes and dramatic set-pieces in Hamm's script.

The film was a mega-hit despite the initial outcry over the casting of comedic actor Michael Keaton (*Mr. Mom*) as Batman -- which was appeased by landing screen legend Jack Nicholson as the Joker -- grossing more than $400 million in global box office against a $48 million budget, plus $750 million more in merchandising.

Between the one-two punch of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Burton's *Batman*, a new look and feel had been established for the 50-year-old superhero. Most of the Batman-related movies and TV shows produced in the 35 years since Burton's *Batman* bear the stamp of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, as well as his equally seminal "Year One" storyline from *Batman* #404-407 (yep, even the *Lego Movie* iteration).

The success of *Batman* lead to the acclaimed *Batman: The Animated Series*, (1992-1995), whose feature film spin-off *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1992) flirted with a PG-13 rating, while Burton returned to direct an arguably darker sequel, *Batman Returns* (1992). The relatively softer performance of both convinced the studio to go more mainstream, resulting in director Joel Schumacher to steer the franchise once more towards camp with *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997). The former received mixed reviews but profitable box office; the latter is considered one of the worst superhero movies ever made.

The subsequent years were fruitless in terms of Bat-movies. Schumacher had hoped to make *Batman Unchained*, a dark coda for his unfinished trilogy that would have put the Dynamic Duo against the revenge-driven team of Scarecrow and Harley Quinn. He also pushed for a live-action direct adaptation of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Both Keaton (who will wear the cape and cowl once again in the upcoming *Batgirl* and *Flash* movies) and Clint Eastwood were considered to play Batman, and singer David Bowie was considered for the Joker (the idea fizzled, but an adaptation in the form of a two-part animated movie was released straight-to-video in 2012/2013).

Young screenwriters Lee Shapiro and Stephen Wise pitched the awkwardly titled *Batman: DarKnight*, a soft reboot with a Halloween theme featuring Scarecrow and Man-Bat. Miller and writer-director Darren Aronofsky (*Black Swan*) developed *Batman: Year One*, an R-rated reboot that bore little resemblance to the source material. Andrew Kevin Walker (*Seven*) and Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind*) worked on drafts of *Batman vs. Superman* that featured the scarred and embittered heroes (Bruce Wayne has retired after a mental breakdown, Clark Kent is a struggling divorcee) put at odds through the machinations of the Joker and Lex Luthor – which include the murder of Bruce's wife and a terrorist attack on Metropolis. Joss Whedon (*Marvel's The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) pitched a norigin story/reboot that saw Bruce mentored by a Hannibal Lecter-knockoff inmate of Arkham Asylum.

All were pitch dark, all went nowhere.

The franchise was trapped in development limbo until director Christopher Nolan (*Dunkirk*) revived it with *Batman Begins* in 2005, followed by *The Dark Knight* in 2008, and *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. Though Nolan's trilogy hews closer to crime and espionage thriller genres, borrowed liberally from several classic stories from the comics, including *The Dark Knight*. The "Tumbler" was inspired by Miller's armored, tank-like version of the Batmobile. The copycat vigilantes of *The Dark Knight* are a riff on the Sons of Batman (except for the hockey pads, of course). There's a straight line from the pages of the miniseries to the debilitated, withdrawn, and disillusioned Caped Crusader of *The Dark Knight Rises*, and the depiction of Batman's ill-fated first battle with Bane in that film owes as much to his fight with the Mutants' leader in *The Dark Knight Returns* as it does *Batman* #497.

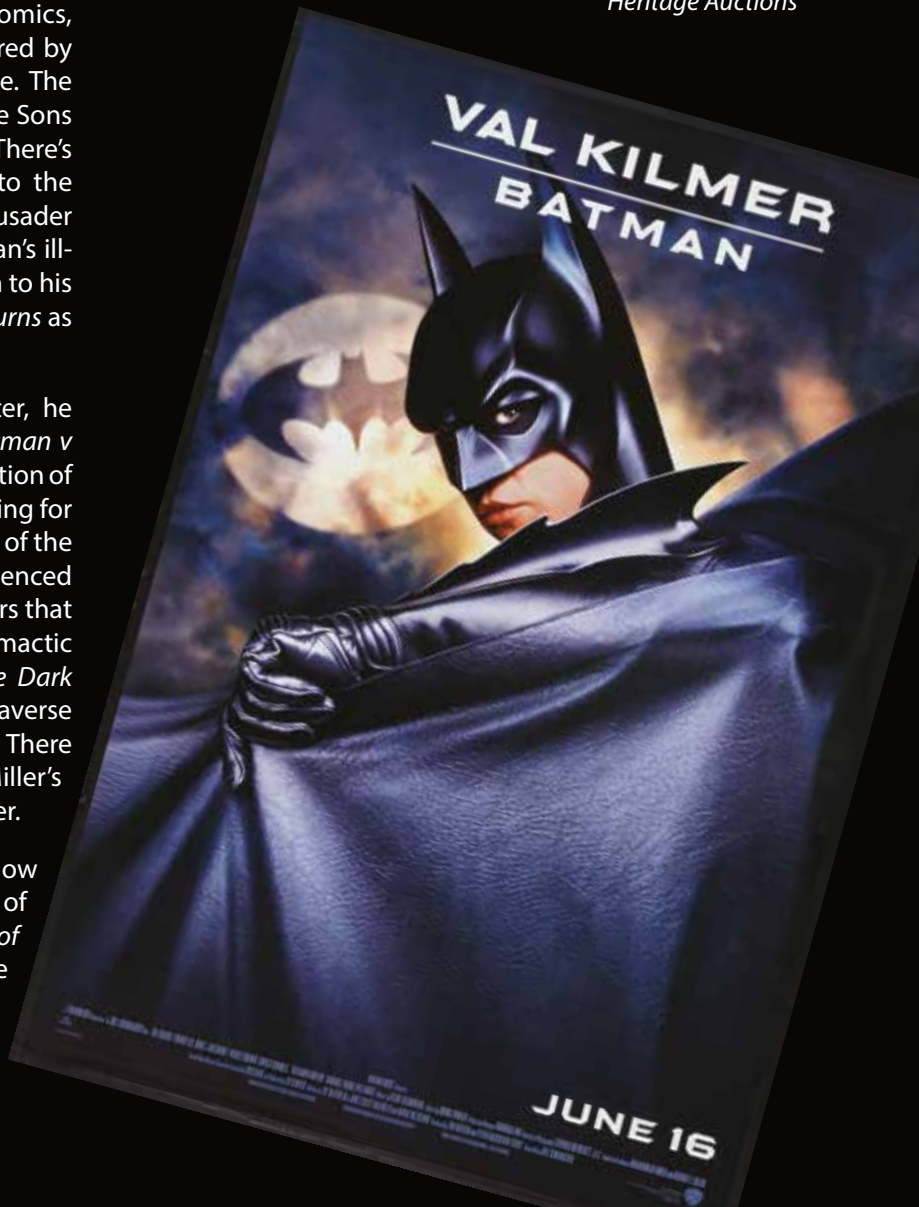
When director Zack Snyder inherited the character, he paid homage to the miniseries more overtly in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), returning to the notion of an older and colder Batman (though, like Nolan, opting for one in his mid-'40s – played by Ben Affleck -- instead of the fifty-something Batman of Miller's tale). Both experienced the death of a Robin. Bruce's brawny physique mirrors that of Miller's, and the armored suit he wears for his climactic battle with the Man of Steel is straight from *The Dark Knight Falls*. Much like Miller, Snyder's Batman is not averse to using lethal force and firearms to dispatch foes. There are several shots in the film taken directly from Miller's work, including a visual reference to that iconic cover.

In Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019), schmaltzy talk-show host Murray Franklin (Robert DeNiro) is a fusion of Jerry Langford (played by Jerry Lewis in *The King of Comedy*) and Miller's David Letterman-esque late night TV host David Endochrine. His interview with the Joker leans heavily into a similar scene in *Hunt the Dark Knight* – including a parody of sex therapist Doctor Ruth Westheimer.

References to *TDK* are sprinkled throughout DC-related television series. *Birds of Prey* (2002-2003) features a Gotham City whose Batman has also retired and disappeared. The Mutants street gang and their hulking leader appear in two episodes of *Gotham* (2014-2019), and "Legends of the Dark Knight" episode of *The New Batman Adventures* (1997-1999) animated series features a segment based on their battles with Batman. An episode of *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-present) features an older, one-armed Oliver Queen/Green Arrow. The Carrie Kelley version of Robin will be a central character in the upcoming *Gotham Knights* TV series.

The hero's most recent film incarnation, titled simply *The Batman* (no relation to Tom Mankiewicz's screenplay of yore) mines other storylines for inspiration, but its dour detective would not likely have made it to the screen without the path blazed by Miller's groundbreaking work.

Gary Dowell, *Comics and Comic Movies Specialist, Heritage Auctions*



Photos of Frank Miller and the Dark Knight Returns artwork were taken by Heritage Auctions on April 26, 2022, in our New York office, during his interview about "The Dark Knight Returns" Book One cover.

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