

Holy Bats in the Belfry, Batman!

Nowadays, Bruce Wayne's Alter Ego Borders on the Psychopathic

BY BRIAN STEINBERG

IMAGINE YOU ARE in the midst of getting mugged and Batman—as improbable as this might seem—swoops upon the scene. What sort of personality do you think he'd display?

People who know the character only from Saturday-morning cartoons, Hollywood movies and a campy TV series that aired in the 1960s would probably picture him as tough but fair, dispatching the criminal with a few hard rights and a deft judo kick. Frank Miller, a comics writer who has a long association with the character, is portraying him as unhinged, and suggesting this iconic hero borders on being a psychopath. Mr. Miller's Batman laughs maniacally to himself while on patrol; saunters about unshaven; beats criminals bloody; and kidnaps a young boy to groom him as his sidekick, Robin—despite protests from other superheroes.

In short, Mr. Miller's Batman, currently gracing the panels of a series of comics called "All-Star Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder," isn't someone who would make good company at a ballgame or the local watering hole. In one issue, a crook stopped by Batman from assaulting a woman asks: "Why can't I feel my hand?" To which Batman replies: "It's called a compound fracture, rapist. It'll never heal. Not right it won't. Not nearly right. You'll remember me every time the air goes wet and cold." While this all may prove shocking to people who have come to know the character as a reliable do-gooder, it's also refreshing, adding a much-needed belt of reality to a genre founded on escapism.

The characterization is raising eyebrows. "I see him as being portrayed as over the top and maniacal," says Nickie Phillips, an assistant professor at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, N.Y., who studies representations of crime and justice in comic books, and who has read the series, published by Time Warner Inc.'s DC Comics. "Batman, he seems to be driven by his obsession and passion for what he considers justice—but it's really extralegal justice."

Mr. Miller has tilted this ground before. In 1986, he unleashed "The Dark Knight Re-



turns," a seminal work among comics aficionados in which an older Batman has retired and is in decline, only to take up the superhero game anew. Mr. Miller treats Batman as an emotional figure with just as many psychological problems to deal with as the oddball criminals he tries to stop. Mr. Miller is also known for his work on several graphic novels that became films, including "Sin City," a gritty collection of film-noir yarns. DC launched its "All Star" series in 2005 as a way to let some of the comics industry's better-known writers and artists work on the company's most iconic characters without the burden of hewing to plot and character conventions already in place in other series.

Mr. Miller's best work blends the hard-boiled milieu of Dashiell Hammett with the outré violence of Quentin Tarantino. Hard-boiled protagonists, however, can quickly become cracked. In Mr. Miller's latest series, Batman seems exactly that. Alfred Pennyworth, longtime butler to Bruce Wayne, Batman's alter ego, likens his employer to "a demon." Batman leaves Dick Grayson, the young kidnapped child, alone in a dark cave to fend off rats and mull his new fate. That's not the Boy Scout-like behavior we have come to expect from Superman, for instance.

The Batman character lends itself to this sort of treatment because he is unlike most superheroes. When these other characters came of age in the 1930s and

1940s, and later in the 1960s, they were adventurers given super powers by means of the flimsiest plot devices possible—a magic ring! a spider bite! They used wisecracks as often as X-ray vision to stop criminals from taking over the world.

Not so Batman. His first appearance in Detective Comics in 1939 came under much tougher circumstances. When Bruce Wayne's wealthy parents take him to see a movie, they are shot down by a crook in a dark alley. Young Mr. Wayne vows to avenge them and takes up cape and cowl. A young reader could well imagine himself as the speedy Flash. Taking on Batman, who has only his superior physical training and desire for justice—no super powers—demands embracing weightier matters.

Mr. Miller's Batman seems less out of place than he might have decades ago. Older readers have returned to comics in recent years, and the stories have become grittier and more realistic. There's not as much deriding-do. In one recent issue of DC's "Justice League of America," Red Tornado, a lesser-known character, has his arm ripped away by a brutish villain. Over at Marvel, another big comic-book publisher, heroes have wrangled over whether to register as operatives of the U.S. government, or be treated as criminals and act as fugitives. Mystery men and swashbucklers would seem silly and out of place to today's more sophisticated readers.

As "All Star Batman" continues, readers will discover reasons for the character's off-putting behavior, suggests Paul Levitz, DC's president and publisher. Even so, as Mr. Miller's story makes clear, fighting criminals is nothing to crack wise about, and certainly not fun. If someone put on a costume to fight crime and swung through city streets in our world, he'd probably be trussed up for the psychiatric ward. It takes someone a little crazy—and willing to break society's rules—to get the job done. No wonder Mr. Miller's Batman seems perturbed.

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