

BATMAN UNAUTHORIZED

VIGILANTES, JOKERS, AND HEROES IN
GOTHAM CITY

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Anyone who wants to write heroic fiction would do well to pay as much attention to his villains as his heroes. It's a lesson I learned pretty late: your good guy is only as good as the bad guy who gives him his opportunity to shine. In the following piece, Lou Anders speculates on how well the Batman's greatest foe—and, I would argue, the greatest evildoer in pop culture—will fare in his next screen incarnation. Along the way, Mr. Anders gives us a glimpse of the many faces of the Batman and offers an opinion as to which one is the truest.

TWO OF A KIND

Can the Team Behind *Batman Begins* Capture the Essence of the Joker?

LOU ANDERS

Once upon a time, when the mention of the Caped Crusader would invoke singing of the Batman Theme from the campy Adam West TV show or recollections of the Hanna-Barbera *Super Friends* series, I would protest that, no, these cartoon and live-action media representations of the Dark Knight Detective weren't the *real* Batman. They were silly Hollywood corruptions and not what I meant when I told you I was a fan. There was a serious story here, waiting to be told.

And with the debut of *Batman Begins*, it was. For the first time in the life of the character's then sixty-six-year history, the real Caped Crusader came to the big screen. The film was a critical as well as commercial success, winning both comic book fan and widespread mainstream approval and grossing \$205 million domestically and \$372 million worldwide. The general consensus was that the "definitive" version of the character had finally been done. Now, the team of director Christopher Nolan and screenwriter David S. Goyer are set to do it again. Joined this time by screenwriter Jonathan Nolan (*The Prestige*, *Memento*), they will return to Gotham City in 2008 with *The Dark Knight*, a film that will tackle the Batman's archnemesis and perhaps the most famous supervillain in

seven decades of comic books, the Joker. Having given us the definitive interpretation of the Batman, will they be able to capture the Clown Prince of Crime as well? To answer the question, one must first look at who the Batman is, and how they were able to sift through almost a century of material to arrive at the core of the crimefighter.

Of course, there isn't really such a thing as a "real" Batman. Leaving aside the obvious contention that he doesn't exist, we must further concede that there has been a multitude of variations and interpretations since his inception. Like many characters who have achieved immortality through their popularity, James Bond and Sherlock Holmes among them, tales of his exploits range far beyond the decades of his conception. The Batman who fought Nazis in World War II and mobsters in the '40s and '50s is not the same Batman who fought terrorists in the '70s or Al-Qaeda in 2007.¹ The Batman of *The Dark Knight Returns* is not the same as the Super-Batman of Planet X (also known as planet Zur-En-Arrh, as recounted in *Batman* #113). Director Tim Burton's Batman is not Joel Schumacher's Batman is not Christopher Nolan's Batman. Batman is a myth, a symbol, a legend like King Arthur or Robin Hood. There are as different iterations as there are writers who have crafted his adventures, his exact nature depending on who is doing the writing and the time in which each tale is set. Batman creator Bob Kane—who was much more of an artist than he was a writer—deserves the most credit, not for his words, but for crafting an enduring iconography—the cowl, the cape, the cave, the car, the butler, the signal, the rogues gallery—that lasts and lends itself to a multitude of interpretations across the decades and now across the centuries. And the version of Batman that delighted small children in the adventures of the *Super Friends* back in 1973 is no less valid than the grittiest noir retellings of the character appearing from Frank Miller in 1986 or Grant Morrison today.

My own introduction to the character came through the Adam West series of 1966–1968, and from a largely forgotten animated series called *The New Adventures of Batman* (1977), which featured Adam West and Burt Ward as the voices of the Dynamic Duo, along with Lou Scheimer as Bat-Mite—a character I loved then as much as I loathed it later. But

¹ Frank Miller's *Holy Terror, Batman!*, which might not appear on time as scheduled.

even as a small child, I was aware of the evolution of the Batman character. My parents had given me a nice hardcover volume called *Batman: From the '30s to the '70s* (Crown Publishers, 1971). It reprinted choice selections from the Dark Knight Detective's career, from his very first appearance (*Detective Comics* #27, "The Case of Bat-Man & the Chemical Syndicate"), to the first appearances of the Joker and Robin, and continuing through important moments such as Dick Grayson's departure for Hudson University and beyond. Poring through this volume, my childhood self was exposed to the entire progression of the superhero genre in microcosm. I was able to track as both art and story grew in depth and sophistication, and though I lacked the vocabulary to describe it, I could sense how Bob Kane's genius lay in creating a character who was so visually memorable that he could be pulled back and forth like taffy and still survive. And I began to get a sense, even then, that within this history there was a serious depiction of the character at odds with some of its more lamentable renditions. What's more, the character had actually begun life on a serious footing, only to slide into parody before a return.

Introduced in 1939, "the Batman" began life as a noir vigilante, very much in the vein of the earlier pulp hero, the Shadow. In fact, he executed criminals without compunction with twin-six guns in a manner that would have made Lamont Cranston proud. But within a year, the Boy Wonder was introduced, World War II was looming large in the American consciousness, and dark-toned stories fell out of favor in lieu of more lighthearted fair. Batman and Robin soon revealed they had a code against killing, the guns were gone (in part to play down the inevitable Shadow comparisons), and their mythos rewritten such that the Batman had never killed.

Truth be told, through much of the '40s and '50s, Batman's comic book exploits were pretty much inline in tone and temperament with those of his camp '60s television show counterpart. To this day, you'll never find a better Penguin than Burgess Meredith or a more accurate rendition of the Riddler than that offered by Frank Gorshin. (Oddly, the only major Bat-villain to be absent from the television show was Two-Face, perhaps because his scarred countenance was too horrific. However, of all the stories from that era, it's interesting to note that the

Two-Face encounters are the least camp, the most poignant—drenched as they were in the character’s guilt and steadfast refusal to believe in the possibility of redemption. As such, they hold up the best in light of today’s more sophisticated readers’ standards.) Still, the Batman TV series and the era that spawned it are generally regarded as the low point in the character’s history.

However, it was as the camp television show was in its final days that a writer named Denny O’Neil (born the same month and year as the Batman himself, May 1939) took over the reigns of the comic book and changed everything. Partnering with the soon-to-be-legendary artist Neal Adams, who brought a hitherto unseen level of realism to the depiction of superheroes, O’Neil revamped the Batman legend, either reinventing the character or returning it to its 1939 roots, depending on your perspective. Robin (who was previously presumed to be thirteen) was swiftly aged and sent off to college. Gone mostly were the costumed villains, replaced by international terrorists, corrupt politicians, and mafia bosses. O’Neil’s Batman was a Darknight Detective—emphasis on “detective”—more akin to Sherlock Holmes than a superhero, who employed his wits and credible criminology methods in the apprehension of evildoers. Rolling with the times, Bruce Wayne moved out of Wayne Manor into a penthouse apartment atop the Wayne Foundation in the heart of Gotham, and the Batmobile itself was often depicted as little more than an unmarked dark blue sports car, not dissimilar to a Corvette of the era. Occasionally it would have the suggestion of the Batman’s cowl in the lines of its hood, but gone were the fins, bubble domes, rocket engines, and Bat-insignias of previous models. The mysterious Ra’s al Ghul was introduced at this time as well, his daughter and Batman-love interest Talia and his Himalayan headquarters both directly inspired by the James Bond film *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*. O’Neil also worked in Batman-inspiration the Shadow, first in *Batman* #253 in a storyline called “Who Knows What Evil—?” and again in “The Night of the Shadow,” appearing in *Batman* #259, which explained that Batman abstained from guns because of a phobia resulting from a childhood encounter with the Shadow. (Since the Shadow was only temporarily licensed to DC, the brilliant *Batman: The Animated Series* later replaced Wayne’s childhood inspiration with a similar character called the Grey

Ghost, voiced, appropriately enough, by Adam West. Ah, the tangled webs. . . .) Suffice to say, the O’Neil and Adams era established the Batman (not Batman, but “the Batman” as he was originally called) as a serious comic book icon, and their tales remained for many years the quintessential depiction of the character.

But a three-decades long backstory weighs heavy, and in the wake of O’Neil’s departure from DC Comics, the costumed villains, one by one, came marching back in. The late ’70s and early ’80s were a schizophrenic time for the character, with writers and fans maintaining the “seriousness” of Batman while parading out an assortment of costumed crazies, with everything from dueling versions of the Mad Hatter to the Calendar Man making an appearance. Slowly, the legend of the Batman began to ebb, if not back toward camp, toward a muddle from which little work of lasting significance emerged. (An exception to this is a brief but significant run in *Detective Comics* by Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers, *Detective Comics* #471–476, August 1977 to March–April 1978, which revived the 1939 villain Professor Hugo Strange and duplicated the Joker’s original killing spree from his first appearance. More on this later.) This is not to say no good work was crafted in this period, but everything that came before was about to be overshadowed by a landmark event in comic book history.

Everything changed when Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* burst on the scene in 1986. In this tale of an aging Bruce Wayne emerging from retirement for one last showdown against crime and corruption, Miller chose to play up the “dark” in *Dark Knight*. His Batman was obsessed, seething with a barely contained rage that forced out any chance at companionship or peace and overwhelmed Wayne. To recount *The Dark Knight Returns*’s influence on and importance in the entire comics industry would take another essay entirely. The prestige format was created for its release, and it almost single-handedly launched the “graphic novel” format as well—to say nothing of the emphasis it caused to be placed on adult storytelling, nor the respect for comic books it engendered in the mainstream. But suffice it to say that *The Dark Knight Returns*, along with Miller’s later *Batman: Year One*, soon became the definitive rendition of the character, and while it has become somewhat diluted by recent poor efforts on Miller’s part—his woefully inferior *The*

Dark Knight Strikes Again reads more like a parody of Frank Miller than Miller himself—still, the 1986 work has characterized the view of Batman that is now entering its third decade of dominance.

It was the initial success of *The Dark Knight Returns* that prompted Warner Bros. to put forth a darker, “serious” cinematic version of the character—it’s been rumored a comedy starring Bill Murray had previously been in development—that resulted in the 1989 Tim Burton film, *Batman*. Praised at the time for being the most serious depiction the Batman had yet received in film or television, and impressive in its striking visual surrealism, it nonetheless wasn’t right in the eyes of many fans, eschewing reality for Dali-esque surrealism and prompting Frank Miller himself to say that there were many versions of the Batman character, and obviously he and Tim Burton were depicting different ones. Nonetheless, the film made the character hotter than ever, and the success of the Burton film prompted Warner Bros. to launch a new cartoon franchise, conceived in more sophistication than any previous animated version. *Batman: The Animated Series* (later *The Adventures of Batman and Robin*, 1992–1995) drew its inspiration not from cinema but from comic books. The brainchild of producers Paul Dini and Bruce Timm, this series accomplished the daunting task of synthesizing six decades of comic material into a coherent narrative. For many, it became the new definitive.

Meanwhile, the live-action cinema franchise quickly degenerated. Michael Keaton, who portrayed the character in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, turned down a then-unheard-of thirty-five million dollars to reprise his role in *Batman Forever*, dissatisfied that the script was lighter in tone than the previous two films. Under the helming of director Joel Schumacher, the franchise that Tim Burton launched ended in the almost universally loathed *Batman & Robin* in 1997. Resembling little more than a decadent, incoherent, and overblown version of the camp ’60s television series, the film was so indisputably bad that even star George Clooney opined, “I think we might have killed the franchise” (Daniel).

And for a while all was quiet. Once again “Batman” was no longer cool, a dirty word, a silly franchise as ill-regarded as the Adam West series had been decades earlier. And any chance of seeing the “real”

Batman on the big screen seemed hopelessly remote. But, again, what is the “real” Batman? “Right” is and will always be subjective, and I wouldn’t begrudge the children of yesterday one iota of their enjoyment when Batman and his super friends save the day. But I contend that we can speak in terms of levels of sophistication of various Batman interpretations, as well as pinpoint key works as having had the most profound and lasting influences on the canon, as determined by writers and fans over years. And by acknowledging that the canon of any long-running franchise is a dialogue between fans and creators, and assembling those stories that have had the most significant lasting impact, we can arrive at something like a Batman “ideal,” even while acknowledging the impossibility of such a goal.

To date, the “great works of the Batman canon” would certainly include O’Neil and Adams’ original run, the aforementioned Englehart & Rogers collaboration, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Year One*, Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*, *Batman: The Animated Series* and related animated movies and spin-offs (*Mask of the Phantasm*, *Batman Beyond*, *Justice League*, etc. . . .), and Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale’s *The Long Halloween* and *Dark Victory*. These works have informed and fed into each other, such that bits of *Year One* were transcribed directly into *Mask of the Phantasm*, themes from *The Killing Joke* found their way into *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker*, characters from *The Animated Series* worked their way into official DC comics continuity, etc. Therefore, with allowances to the character’s variegated history, and apologies to Adam West, a “definitive depiction” of the Dark Knight might look something like this.

First and foremost, an accurate rendition of the Batman must acknowledge the extreme force of will of the character. Michael Keaton’s Batman was a frustrated and confused little guy who suited up in stiff armor and used an arsenal of impossible gadgets to vent his frustration, then came home and had trouble sleeping. He was dark all right, but his anger was unfocused, his motivation unclear, his methods unrefined. The Batman of the comics, as he is portrayed today, is a “normal” human being who can enter a room full of super-powered beings and command their attention and send a chill down every spine there—despite having no powers of his own—by his mere presence and force of personality.

This is a man who believes, as he said in *The Dark Knight Returns*, that “the world only makes sense when you force it to” (192), and has the will to carry out that objective. An accurate presentation, therefore, has to understand this sense of will, and presence, and discipline, and tightly restrained force.

Secondly, it’s important to understand that the Batman has something to prove. Legendary artist Dick Giordano once said of Batman, “The Batman does what he does for himself, for his needs. That society gains from his actions is incidental, an added value . . . but not the primary reason for his activities” (“Graphic Novel Reviews”). Consider: Young Bruce Wayne was the prince of Gotham City, a billionaire’s son living a life only the top 1 percent of the world could enjoy. Then, in an instant, his happiness and security were yanked away from him. That realization, the realization of the inevitability of death as the great equalizer—that no matter who you are, you can step outside and be hit by a bus, be struck by lightning, choke on an olive pit, be shot by a petty thief, and it can all end—struck the young Wayne at an age way earlier than most of us ever encounter it. (I still remember being seventeen and seeing how close I could drive my car to a retaining wall on a curving mountain road. And the exact moment, a year later, when I realized the foolishness of that action, when I suddenly understood with stunning certainty that I was not immortal.) This knowledge—and accompanying fear—of death at such an impressionable age terrified him. Too much, too soon, and he was over the edge. Like Captain Ahab, who lost his leg (and more if you read between the lines) to the White Whale, Wayne set out to prove to the universe that death could not catch him unawares again. He chose as his territory Gotham City, and as his target the criminal underworld (as Ahab chose the whale), but his real target (and intended audience) was the cosmos itself. In a Batman story from the early ’70s, a trained martial artist studied Batman in combat and then attempted to take him down. Later, looking out the window of Commissioner Gordon’s office, Batman mused that somewhere out there, some other punk was readying himself to take his shot. Gordon asked if that made him depressed, and Batman responded that, no, he could hardly wait. In “Ghost of the Killer Skies” (*Detective Comics* #404), he even challenged a cornered opponent to a duel in the air in biplanes, a rather pointless bit of theatrics when a simple punch would have sufficed, until

we remember his motivation—proving to himself and the universe that no matter what form death takes, it will find him ready. This theme played out in full in Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which every possible death was evaluated by the Batman until he settled on one grand enough to lay his spirit to rest—that of beating the Man of Steel, here very deliberately a stand-in for God, in a fistfight. Throughout the graphic novel, Superman was built up in divine terms, the President of the United States even saying in a televised address, “We have God on our side . . . or the next best thing” (119). When Batman beat Superman senseless, he declared, “In all the years to come . . . in your most private moments . . . I want you to remember . . . my hand . . . at your throat. . . . I want . . . you to remember . . . the one man who beat you . . .” (195). And with that, he “died” with a heart-stopping concoction of his own making. When he was later revived, it was only Bruce Wayne who emerged, by and finally himself, at long last free of the spirit of the “burnt remains of a crimefighter whose time has passed” (199).²

Thirdly, essential to the Batman character is a refusal to kill and an aversion to guns in particular. Not to pick on him excessively, but in the second Burton film, *Batman Returns*, Michael Keaton’s Batman sits inside the protection of his armored Batmobile and burns alive an unprotected man with a flame from his rocket engine, after the other ineffectually menaced him by breathing fire in a cheap circus stunt. This dick-wagging scene, which drew a chuckle from the audience I saw it with, not only flew in the face of seventy years of continuity, but was the most cowardly act the Batman has ever been seen to enact on film. In contrast, the Batman of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* shut off his weaponry and emerged from his Batmobile to take on a younger, stronger, seemingly superior foe bare-handed because “I honestly don’t know if I could beat him” (77) (see the second point above). The Batman absolutely cannot kill, even in self-defense. In fact, especially

² Miller undermined this himself twelve years later when DC Comics paid him to write the three-issue sequel, *The Dark Night Strikes Again*. Controversial, and largely considered an inferior repudiation of the original, I don’t think much of it myself. The kindest thing that can be said of it is that it may be a deliberate satire of the past decade of grim and gritty adult works that Miller himself helped to set in motion. Editor’s Note: See Geoff Klock’s essay following this one for another interpretation.

not in self-defense. Since he is acting out of selfish motivation, as Giordano notes above, and placing himself into situations in which he must prove his superiority over death on a nightly basis, he would be a monster if he condoned killing in self-defense. His entire perception of his own sanity, therefore, and his ability to circumnavigate Gotham's laws in favor of a higher, personal justice, rests on his interpretation of this razor-thin line.

Finally, any accurate depiction of the Batman must include the understanding that, unlike the vast majority of costumed crime fighters, Batman's secret identity is not his core persona. Bruce Wayne, the millionaire playboy, is the disguise, whereas "the Batman" is his true nature. In Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, when asked by a henchman if they can unmask the captive Batman to see his true face, the Joker snapped, "That is his true face." In an episode of the animated spin-off series *Batman Beyond*, when a criminal named Shriek used a chip implanted in his skull to try to drive the elder Bruce Wayne insane by making him hear voices in his head, Batman confessed that he maintained his grip thusly: "the voices kept calling me Bruce. In my mind, that's not the name I call myself" ("Shriek," 1-6). Wayne is a prop, a place for Batman to hide during the day. Unlike other heroes, who fear exposure of their private lives, if Bruce Wayne were ever revealed to be the Batman, Wayne would merely disappear, and six months later another alter-ego would emerge to serve a similar function, but the Batman would continue unaffected. Inconvenienced, sure, but unchanged.

Certainly, expecting Hollywood to get all the subtle nuances of the above is a tall order, so it's little short of a miracle that they found a team who did. Director Christopher Nolan and screenwriter David S. Goyer took as their inspiration the aforementioned seminal works, relying heavily on Denny O'Neil's original stories of Ra's al Ghul, Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*, a 1989 comic book story called "The Man Who Falls," which was itself a retelling/compilation of several classic stories (originally published in the *Secret Origins* trade paperback collection), and Loeb and Sale's *The Long Halloween* and *Dark Victory*. Star Christian Bale even kept copies of the latter works on set with him for reference when he needed help maintaining his focus on the character. Drawing from these seminal works, all of which were already feeding off of and into

each other, they produced *Batman Begins*. And as to our criteria for a “definitive” Batman?

They nail the force of will of the character when Henri Ducard says to Bruce Wayne, “Your training is nothing. The will to act is everything.” If this sounds a bit like Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the Will to Power, that’s probably the intent, as witness Ducard’s words about the strong and the weak. As to the juggle between personal vendetta and the ancillary benefit to society, see the film’s ongoing dialogue with Alfred Pennyworth. As to the Bruce Wayne persona, Rachel Dawes has it right when she says the face the criminals see is the real one. And as for his code against killing, the entire film is an exploration of how close to that line Bruce Wayne will go without crossing over (“I won’t kill you. But I don’t have to save you either”). And the success of the film—which had the daunting task of relaunching a dead and lampooned franchise and did so triumphantly—was testament to the validity of this interpretation of the character. Simply put, by crafting what is the most faithful-to-the-comics adaptation of Batman to date on film, Nolan and Goyer created in *Batman Begins* what has emerged as the new definitive rendition of the Batman, as well as raised the bar for comic book adaptations henceforth.

Now, this Dynamic Duo, together with Nolan’s brother and screenwriting partner Jonathan, are setting up to do it again with *The Dark Knight*, a film that will see them return to Gotham City to tackle the Batman’s archnemesis, the most famous supervillain of them all, the Joker. So, who is this Joker and where did he come from?

The Harlequin of Hate, as he is sometimes called, was first introduced in “Batman vs. the Joker” in *Batman* #1, spring 1940. In his first appearance, he was a deadly serious murderer, who announced his intended victims’ fates and dared the police to stop him. He was ghastly, ghostly, nothing to laugh about. In fact, he racked up quite a body count in his first twelve appearances, killing almost thirty people before being sent to the electric chair. But the Joker developed a knack for cheating seeming-deaths, and this was far from the end for the character, despite being originally conceived as a one-off. However, the editors of *Batman* began to fear that leaving a murderer on the loose undermined the Detective’s image, and so instituted a policy of only letting one-shot villains kill. For this and other reasons, the Joker was softened, dwindling into a clown-

ish buffoon more interested in pranks than killing sprees. In fact, he wasn't even officially crazy. There was actually a comic in which the resolution involved Batman and Robin temporarily convincing the Joker that he was going mad. "The Crazy Crime Clown" (*Batman* #74) saw the Joker placed in a padded cell, but ended with Bruce Wayne musing, "I see where the Joker's recovered from the confusing night we gave him! They're transferring him to the state prison!" To which Dick Grayson replied, "Yes—he finally had to tell the authorities where Derek's money was hidden, in order to prove that he himself was sane!" To prove he was sane? Are you sure?

The character then disappeared almost entirely for much of the '60s, and it wasn't until the aforementioned Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams run, in a now-famous story in 1973 entitled "The Joker's Five Way Revenge" (*Batman* #251), that he was returned to the level of a serious and murderous threat. It was in this issue that his lack of sanity was established. When he was incarcerated, we learn that it was not in Gotham Penitentiary as previous tales had it, but in a place called Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane. (The name is a nod to the horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, Arkham being the fictional Massachusetts city that features heavily in his horror writings about the Cthulhu mythos.)

This notion that the Ace of Knives is "criminally insane" was given more depth in the Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers run in a 1978 story entitled "The Laughing Fish" (*Detective Comics* #475), which combined a deliberate reworking of the Joker's original 1940's appearance with a severely demented personality. To date, this issue remains one of the best portrayals of the character's madness. Superman writer Kurt Busiek, in an article in *Wizard* magazine, remembers, "Hands down, the best Joker bit ever, to my mind, is when he tries to copyright fish. . . . It's such a demented thing to do, but he pursues it so intently, so matter-of-factly—pausing only to wonder if it might not work because people might stop eating fish, but reasoning that vegetarians won't go for it—that it really makes him feel like a madman, rather than like a criminal with daffy overtones" (quoted in "Joker [comics]").

From that point forward, the Joker was always depicted as being, if you will pardon the pun, batshit crazy. But it was Alan Moore's landmark graphic novel *The Killing Joke* that truly established the definitive ver-

sion of the character, retelling his origin story while allowing for differences in continuity. As the character himself said of his history, “Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another . . . if I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!” Despite some confusion as to his former life, the idea that the Joker suffered a personal tragedy beyond just his physical scarring and equal to Bruce Wayne’s own loss was introduced as explanation for the character’s madness. As recounted here, that tragedy was the death of his wife and unborn child. In this story, the Joker shot Barbara Gordon in the stomach, paralyzing her for life, then kidnapped and brutalized her father Commissioner James Gordon, forcing him to look at photographs of his naked and traumatized daughter in an effort to drive him insane, an attempt to prove that anyone can have “one bad day” and become as the Joker is now. This unprecedented graphic violence escalated post-*Killing Joke*, with the Joker going on to murder Jason Todd, the second Robin, as well as Commissioner Gordon’s second wife, Sarah Essen. By 2007, the Joker was indisputably one of the most dangerous and insane villains in DC’s entire universe. This is in evidence in the 1995 three-issue *Underworld Unleashed*, in which Flash-nemesis the Trickster said, “When supervillains want to scare each other, they tell Joker stories.”

So in the same way that we have crafted a definitive Batman, can we come up with a set of guidelines for what a definitive portrayal of the Ace of Knaves should look like?

To begin with the obvious: the Joker is dangerously insane. Far from being Cesar Romero in greasepaint and armed with a joy buzzer, this is Charles Manson meets Hannibal Lector. A modern portrayal of the Joker needs to understand this and show us someone truly terrifying, worthy of the villain said to have killed more than 2,000 people, including, as recounted in a 1996 issue of *Hitman*, an entire kindergarten class. In short, he needs to be truly frightening.

Secondly, and this is minor but please indulge me, the Joker’s face is *not* fixed in a grin. True, the character was modeled on Conrad Veidt from the 1928 silent film, *The Man Who Laughs*, based on the novel by Victor Hugo, about a boy whose face is mutilated into a permanent smile. Bob Kane and Bill Finger took inspiration for the Joker’s look from this character, but nowhere was it on record that his face was fixed. This misassumption

found its way into the 1989 film, in which the Joker's face is frozen from a gunshot wound, but had stayed out of the comics until just this year, when Grant Morrison introduced the heresy in *Batman* #663. Hopefully, Nolan and Goyer will know better and won't saddle Heath Ledger with any cumbersome and unnecessary prosthetics.³

But most important is that the Joker is the one person who truly understands the complex nature of the Batman's code against killing. In fact, he is the single character in the Batman mythos who understands this as well as Batman himself, who grasps how tight a line it is that the hero walks and who knowingly pours as much pressure on this line as he can in a calculated effort to force Batman to cross over.

In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, the Batman says, "I'll count the dead, one by one. I'll add them to the list, Joker. The list of all the people I've murdered—by letting you live . . ." (117). For his part, while poisoning a troop of boy scouts, the Joker says, "They could put me in a helicopter and fly me up in the air and line the bodies head to toe on the ground in delightful geometric patterns like an endless June Taylor dancers routine—and it would never be enough. No, I don't keep count. But *you* do. And I love you for it" (140). His "affection" for the Batman, whom he calls "darling" more than once, comes precisely from knowing how much the mayhem he causes wounds the other man. He knows exactly what he is doing, tormenting the Batman with his crimes, deliberately attempting to force Batman to take a life preemptively. Finally, in the end, when the Batman broke his neck but failed to do so with enough pressure to kill him, he chided, "I'm really . . . very disappointed with you, my sweet . . . the moment was . . . perfect . . . and you . . . didn't have the nerve. . . . Paralysis . . . really . . . they'll kill you for this . . . and they'll never know . . . that you didn't have the nerve . . ." (150–151). And the Batman lamented, "voices calling me a killer . . . I wish I were" (150). The Joker finished himself off, and as the Batman hobbled away, the clown's corpse seemed to mock him for his lack of nerve.

³ After I wrote this, an early publicity shot of Heath Ledger released to the Internet indicates that their Joker will have a scarred mouth and may *not* have white skin. As much as this upsets the canon-keeper in me, the intent of the filmmakers seems to be in presenting the Joker as anything but comical, recasting him as a seriously disturbed psychopath familiar to viewers of films like the *Saw* films. I applaud this intent.

But why this game? Why does the Joker so desperately want to die at Batman's hands? For that we have to turn to Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. When explaining his rationale for brutalizing Barbara Gordon and then forcing her father to witness the footage, the Joker said, "You see, it doesn't matter if you catch me and send me back to the asylum . . . Gordon's been driven *mad*. I've proved my point. I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day."

Most of us don't hinge our entire sense of sanity on one single facet of character. We don't anchor our identity on a single razor's edge. But the Batman does. Taking the methods of a criminal—breaking and entering, assault, vigilantism, etc.—into his hands, the line he has drawn is his only self-justification, his only proof that the darkness has not completely swallowed him. But if the Joker can get the Batman to bend, just once, he can prove that anyone, even a person of towering force of will, will snap if subjected to enough pressure—i.e., the Joker himself is blameless for his crimes, as he was just someone who snapped after a sufficient amount of tragedy. In *The Further Adventures of the Joker*, in a story by Mark L. Van Name and Jack McDevitt called "Happy Birthday," the Joker tries to demonstrate this once again. He calls in favors and threats all over town, pouring criminals onto the street, subjecting Gotham to a week of utter chaos. This takes a predictable toll on the Caped Crusader. Then, at the culmination, he disguises himself as a cop and dresses a kidnapped cop up as the Joker. Accompanying Batman on a raid, he asks the Dark Knight if he shouldn't just do the world a favor and pull the trigger, and for a moment, the Batman considers. Then Batman sees through the game. But at the story's conclusion, the Joker remarks, "So I won that one. And sometimes at night, when the moon is high, and I know he's out there, I feel a little better. The distance between us isn't as great as it used to be" (290).

This is spelled out again in "The Clown at Midnight" (*Batman* #663): "You can't kill me without becoming like me. I can't kill you without losing the only human being who can keep up with me. Isn't it ironic?!" Later in the issue, he mused, "I could never kill you. Where would the act be without my straight man?"

Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* is, even in Morrison's admission, not a great portrayal of Batman, but it does get one thing right about the Joker. At the graphic novel's resolution, the Batman agrees with the Joker and acknowledges the necessity of his own insanity. The result? The Joker is satisfied. Having finally gotten the admission he's *always* wanted, he shuts everything down, surrenders, and walks Batman out of Arkham with an arm around his shoulder, promising him, "Enjoy yourself out there. In the Asylum. Just don't forget—if it gets too tough . . . there's always a place for you here."

Just like Batman, the Joker has something to prove. Their motivations are locked like opposite poles of a magnet. That Batman draws such a clear line in the sand is irresistible to a psyche desperate to see only shades of grey. He's willing to murder the entire world if that is what it takes to make the Dark Knight relinquish his last, tenuous, and tiny finger-hold on sanity. His own salvation rests on proving his point. If Nolan, Nolan, and Goyer understand even half of this, we'll be alright. Given their track record, I suspect we will be, and the most famous supervillain in the history of comics will finally be given his full cinematic due. After all, when you have this level of material to draw upon, anything less would be crazy.

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Dennis Joseph O'Neil. 28K likes. Let me say Uh-Oh ě, í-ŷí' í™, ð'ěš" ěš" í,-ěž'í'ěž€ ě' ě, €ižě;œěš" ě,, ě-í' ě¶€i;±í•œ Let me say Uh-Oh ě, ě, ě•œ ě,, ě°€ ě, ě' ě— ě, ě•,, ě" ě%-ě³ ěž'í' (ě,, ěšœí' í'ěŸ° ě, ě°€iš^ ě" ěž'í'—).Ā See more of Dennis Joseph O'Neil on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Dennis Joseph O'Neil on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Dennis O'Neil began as Stan Lee's editorial assistant in the mid-1960s. He wrote comic stories for Batman starting in the 1970s, and was one of the guiding forces behind returning the Batman character to its dark roots from the campiness of the '60s. He's written several novels, comics, short stories, reviews and teleplays, including the