Gotham (K)Nights: Utopianism, American Mythology, and Frank Miller’s Bat(-topia)

By Graham J. Murphy

Graphic novels (known alternately as comic books, sequential art, or the funny books) are only recently generating significant scholarly attention and respect, having become "much more sophisticated since the advent of Archie or Superman" and emerging as "a legitimate area of scholarship" (McCabe 1). Alan Moore (Miracleman, V for Vendetta, Watchmen), Neil Gaiman (Sandman), Art Spiegelman (Maus: A Survivor’s Tale), Daniel Clowes (Ghost World), Chris Ware (Quimby the Mouse), Warren Ellis and John Cassaday (Planetary), and Frank Miller (Daredevil, Wolverine, Elektra: Assassin, Sin City, 300) are key people in this maturation and sophistication. Frank Miller has recently achieved media crossover success as writer of the 300 and Sin City graphic novels-turned-Hollywood-blockbusters, and for his work on Batman: Year One (Batman #404–407; 1987) that inspired director Christopher Nolan’s Batman Begins (2005) and his upcoming stint as writer/director of Will Eisner’s The Spirit (2008). In spite of a diverse portfolio, the iconic Batman has grounded Miller’s reputation, and he repeatedly returns to a Dark Knight universe — Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986), Batman: Year One, Spawn/Batman (1994), The Dark Knight Strikes Again (2001), All-Star Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder (2005 – ), and "Holy Terror, Batman!" (TBA) — to (re)envision this icon, even if it means occasionally upsetting Batman purists.

The four-volume Batman: The Dark Knight Returns [1] has been applauded for redefining mainstream comic books and contributing to the genre’s growing sophistication. Brent Fishbaugh lauds Miller’s series (along with Alan Moore’s Watchmen) for altering "the way many Americans would view comic books" (189). Miller’s series invites its readers "to completely rethink our conception of the superhero, and press[es] us to reconsider some of the fundamental moral principles that have traditionally underwritten our appreciation of superheroes" (Skoble 29) while also initiating the "revisionary superhero narrative: a superhero text...whose ‘meaning’ is found in its relationship with another comic book" (Klock 25). Finally, The Dark Knight Returns (in conjunction with Moore’s Watchmen, Miracleman, and Mark Gruenwald’s Squadron Supreme) showcases the genre turning "in on itself and the conventions of the genre become the subject for the stories. Thus, comic books are produced that are more meditations on the superhero than entertaining superhero-genre stories" (Coogan 218).

The post-Dark Knight Returns years, however, have been tough on Miller’s chiropteran crimefighter. In an online issue of Challenging Destiny, James Schellenberg revisits this acclaimed series to conclude its allure has been lost. Its darkness, overall tone, and original characterization is "the new orthodoxy...Miller’s version of Batman had its time and that time has now passed." Batman apparently isn’t the only victim of redundancy. Coogan characterizes the Eighties and Nineties as a tough time for superheroes en masse because "the conventions that have sustained [the superhero genre] no longer seem to work" (216).
Even Miller looks back to the Nineties and Oughts with disdain. "Things have gotten so dreary," he tells Charles Brownstein, "The heroes have gotten so ugly that even their muscles have muscles."

The mixed response to The Dark Knight Strikes Again (2001-02), otherwise known as DK2, hasn't helped the beleaguered Batman. Andrew D. Arnold's online critique for Time.comix accuses The Dark Knight Strikes Again of getting bogged down by secondary characters so that "[r]eading the book becomes too much like watching Frank Miller play with someone else's dolls...[and seeing] Miller handle characters this way has the same empty appeal as watching a sandcastle get kicked over." Equally condemnatory is Claude Lalumière's online review. He dismisses the script as lacking the "emotional nuances of its predecessor," while its hasty artwork "lacks the power created by the dense, textured, and carefully choreographed artwork that filled every page of The Dark Knight Returns." Other online comments include Booklist's description of the artwork as "unconventional, his drawing more cartoonish, the coloring more florid, and his overall attitude just generally more over-the-top," while Publisher's Weekly admits to a series that is "[m]uch sloppier and gaudier," that "didn't really resemble Miller's earlier book."

A common thread among these (and other) reviews is a general disappointment that the sequel didn't repeat the formula. It wasn't The Dark Knight Returns Part Two (in spite of its DK2 tag) and this might explain its mixed reception. My (re)reading of the entire Dark Knight arc — The Dark Knight Returns and The Dark Knight Strikes Again — challenges the negative critiques levelled against The Dark Knight Strikes Again by highlighting the conceptual spine of a narrative arc that emphasizes (adult) meditations on the relationship between utopianism and (super)heroism, in service to contemporary utopian socio-political critique. Specifically, the Dark Knight arc deploys utopianism and utopian critical tropes as critical dystopia whose political and social critique posits a rekindling of American mythology and engendering of individual aspirations and agency.

"What happened to them? Where are they? Where are our heroes?" — The Dark Knight Strikes Again #1

In Lyman Tower Sargent's terms, utopianism is "social dreaming" (1) manifest commonly in the familiar positive utopia (eutopia), a "utopia that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which the reader lived" (1) and equally familiar negative utopia (dystopia), a utopia "considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" (2). Capitalizing on a well-established dystopia tradition, the Dark Knight arc establishes from the outset that utopianism is threatened by an absence of social dreaming. A strolling Bruce Wayne, having retired his Batman crime-fighting persona following the death of Jason Todd (Robin II) and community resistance to vigilantism, confronts social resignation on the streets he once protected, the streets "of this city I'm learning to hate, the city that's given up, like the whole world seems to have" (12). Tellingly, two citizens in the background, faces turned to the darkened sky, carry synecdochic placards: "We Are Damned."
Miller's diegetic despair originates in the absence of (super)heroism. With a few (less-than-effective) exceptions, there are no (super)heroes, a condition exacerbated in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* when the heroes are imprisoned, lounging in a bar, or, in the case of Ralph Dibny, a.k.a., The Elongated Man, hawking Viagra-like performance enhancers. This is a world devoid of functional mythology because the absence of (super)heroes finds social reform replaced by social retrenchment. Batman's (re)emergence in *The Dark Knight Returns* stages a cultural and symbolic renaissance aimed at infusing oppositional energy into this vacant mytho-scape; yet, Batman's public reception is decidedly mixed. An anti-Batman camp of social retrenchment argues the crimefighter is an aberrant psychotic force whose reappearance endorses vigilantism and violence. The pro-Batman camp, the one with whom the reader is meant to identify, is led by Lana Lang. She argues Batman's emergence is a social reformation and "a symbolic resurgence of the common man's will to resist...A rebirth of the American fighting spirit" (41). Lana goes on to say that "we live in the shadow of crime...with the unspoken understanding that we are victims – of fear, of violence, of social impotence. A man has risen to show us that the power is, and always has been, in our hands. We are under siege – he's showing us that we can resist" (66).

This reform vs. retrenchment conflict is epitomized in the Batman/Superman conflicts of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. These two icons come to fisticuffs over their contrasting political ideologies. Superman embodies the American ideal – he is an alien/immigrant who rises to power on American soil and wraps himself in the red and blue patriotism of the American flag. He is also a shadow of his former self. He has retreated from the public eye, he secretly operates in the background and he is an agent of the government. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* #1, Batman frees Ray Palmer (a.k.a. The Atom, a superhero who can shrink to microscopic size) from his villainous incarceration. Superman muses, he’d "been negotiating Palmer's release for months. We’d almost come to terms" (22). Superman is neither inspirational nor aspirational: he maintains the status quo and asserts that "we must not remind them that giants walk the earth" (131), preferring to cope with
contemporary ills through negotiation, even defending current conditions rather than inspiring or embodying any oppositional energy. He has effectively traded social dreaming for social stagnation.

That Batman is the antithesis of Superman is abundantly clear when the Dark Knight pummels Superman in the climactic battle of *The Dark Knight Returns* Book Four. "You sold us out, Clark," he says. "You gave them – the power – that should have been ours. Just like your parents taught you. My parents...taught me a different lesson...lying on this street shaking in deep shock...dying for no reason at all – they showed me that the world only make sense when you force it to" (192). Batman's utopian hope combats a dystopian world. Superman's anti-utopian resignation and political stoicism help support it. Batman's focus is also pivotal in this dialogue. He has moved beyond Gotham's crime-ridden streets. He is now talking about shaping the world and making it make sense. The end of *The Dark Knight Returns* finds Batman prepared to put social dreaming into practice to defy those damnation placards in the early pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

"You cannot stop me – not with wine or vows of the weight of age." – *The Dark Knight Returns*

Before taking on this utopian endeavour that concludes *The Dark Knight Returns* and launches *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, Batman must first resolve a profound identity crisis: Batman vs. Bruce Wayne. In the first three books of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman stakes a strong claim on Bruce Wayne's psyche. For example, Alfred, the loyal butler, finds the sleepwalking Bruce down in the Batcave and they are both surprised to see Bruce has unknowingly shaved off his moustache. Or, Bruce is watching late night television when he accidentally tunes into *The Mask of Zorro*, the film he saw with his parents on the fateful night they were killed. The traumatic images of his parents' murder flood his mind. His channel-flipping only intensifies the rage. He is inundated with the news of violent attacks, rapes, mutilations, and abductions. Batman calls forth from the depths, saying, "The time has come. You know it in your soul. For I am your soul...You cannot escape me. You are puny, you are small – You are nothing – A hollow shell, a rusty trap that cannot hold me – Smoldering, I burn you – burning you, I flare, hot and bright and fierce and beautiful – You cannot stop me – not with wine or vows of the weight of age" (25). Miller clearly shows Batman is not simply a costume Bruce Wayne once donned to fight evil. Rather, it is perhaps Bruce Wayne that is the masque that hides the insistent identity of Batman, an identity that may be "a kind of beast that Bruce Wayne has to control" (Coogan 105).

This dichotomous identity is the hallmark of the Batman (and most superhero) mythos and is a consequence of Bruce's boyhood trauma. His parents were slain before his very eyes. In "Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution," Michael Brady explores the Batman of Tim Burton's *Batman* film (1989) to argue Bruce's mental state is explicable through the "flooding of the psychic apparatus with large amounts of stimuli and the helplessness experienced when the ego is overwhelmed" (172). Brady sees the telltale signs of a traumatized youth who grows into a traumatized man, a subject whose "protective innocence" has cracked and whose "sense of trust in the world is lost" (173). Therefore, Bruce needs to adopt the Batman identity "to heal and act out his rage. He needs the menacing armoured costume and various Bat toys. This equipment allows Wayne to overcome his inhibitions and be active" (175-75). Brady's assessment is equally applicable to the comic book crimefighter. Miller's Bruce Wayne also survives a heinous crime, effectively desiring to fight crime as "a compensatory wish" and using "sublimation to harness his rage and anger" (Brady 174). Peter Coogan even goes so far as to say that "Bruce Wayne's feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing arise from survivor's
What is intriguing in Miller's *Dark Knight* arc is the working through of this trauma. Rage and anger are eventually redirected away from street-crime to social (and global) injustice. While beating on criminals with brute strength may have been an effective sublimation of trauma in Batman's youth, it is less effective in his golden years. He is somewhat flabby, definitely slower, and certainly in a less-than-peak physical condition, at least for a crimefighter. Batman repeatedly comments on his age. He requires his legs to climb a rope, he must catch his breath when escaping the police, he is repeatedly winged by bullets and he continually suffers from heart palpitations. Batman tests himself against the youthful Mutant leader of *The Dark Knight Returns* Book Two, a gangland nemesis who has "exactly the kind of body I wish he didn't have...powerful, without enough bulk to slow him down...every muscle a steel spring – ready to lash out – and he's young...in his physical prime...and I honestly don't know if I could beat him" (77). The Mutant pounds Batman to within an inch of his life. He digs his claws into Batman's back, he uses his teeth to rip into his trapezius, he breaks his nose and his arm and he eventually clubs him with a crowbar. The new Robin (a.k.a. Carrie Kelley) – a young girl inspired to take on the sidekick mantle – and a well-placed explosive pellet from his utility belt are timely interventions that save Batman's life. Having learned his lesson, Batman switches tactics to focus on brains, not brawn. He arranges for their rematch to take place in a mudhole at the local dump, thereby cutting into the Mutant's speed and his strong legs. Batman emerges as the victor thanks to his strategizing. More importantly, however, he also learns firsthand that there are more powerful adversaries in this world and defeating them requires intricate strategy, not strength and brute force. This is a valuable lesson when Batman later has to vanquish other powerful opponents, such as his inner demons, Superman and the dark powers of this near-future dystopia.

Miller seemingly resolves the divisive identity crisis in the concluding pages of *The Dark Knight Returns* Book Four. During Batman's climactic battle with Superman, his mask is ripped off but he gives no ground. Bruce Wayne wears Batman's armour, Batman wears Bruce Wayne's face. Batman then triggers his own heart attack and fakes his death. Alfred simultaneously destroys the Wayne dynasty in a fiery conflagration, as "Mrs. Wayne's priceless collection of porcelain shatters, musically...empty stables fly apart like toothpick models...the central mass of Wayne Manor shudders as if alive...then vanishes in a flash bright as the sun" (196). The Dark Knight (with Alfred's assistance, his final act before he dies amidst the ruins of the Wayne lineage) buries both "Batman" and "Bruce Wayne," only to integrate them into a psychologically unified whole: the Bat-Man.[6] A few pages later in a new Batcave, a costume-less Bat-Man crouches over blueprints and gives orders to the Sons of Batman, remnants of the Mutant gang that have turned to Bat-Man for leadership, and Robin, who remains in costume. Bat-Man says, "We have years – as many as we need...Years – to train and study and plan...here, in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crimefighter whose time has passed...It begins here – an army – to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers" (199).
This psychological resolution is notably pronounced in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. A joyful Bat-Man has replaced a dour Batman. In *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* #2, Bat-Man remarks, during a fight with numerous nefarious henchmen, that "[l]ife doesn't get any better than this. God, I love my job" (13). Bat-Man puts his heels up on the console of his flying Batmobile and says, "Striking terror. Best part of the job" (18).

Bat-Man has to even caution himself in his planned attack on Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, saying, "Stay grim. Don't break into a run. Don't laugh like a schoolboy. Don't let them know how much fun you're having" (34). Interestingly, characters alternate between calling him Bruce and calling him Batman (or "Bats"). Finally, Bat-Man reintroduces himself to the world at a public concert and removes his mask, prompting one audience member to yell, "That's Bruce Wayne," while another yells, "That's Batman" (78). The Bruce Wayne/Batman dichotomy is meaningless in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. Bat-Man is a gestalt of Bruce Wayne and Batman.

"Freedom of speech is a wonderful thing – so long as nobody's
Bat-Man’s (re)emergence in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* is good news because the Earth is indeed in its blackest night. President Rickard announces, in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* #1, “the state of the union is strong – stronger than it has ever been” and the nation is at peace, while “our children live in a world free of crime” (2). These apparently are “the best of times” (1). They are also the worst of times. James Olsen, the only vocal opponent, counters the Prez point-by-point.[7] The union is strong “like an iron fist” (1), peace has been achieved because “we killed just about everybody who disagrees with us” and the reason children live in a world free of crime is that they are living "in a damn police state” (2). Olsen concludes with the plaintive cry, “What happened to them? Where are they? Where are our heroes?” (3). The Prez is later revealed to be Lex Luthor’s holographic projection and it is Luthor who is the true power in this negative utopia. As a pseudo-Big Brother, he keeps files on every citizen, uses taxpayers’ money to maintain orbital weaponry aimed squarely at Earth, censures the media, imposes covert censorship, and controls the economic and military infrastructure. He is so powerful he need not fear James Olsen’s media ranting because “freedom of speech is a wonderful thing – so long as nobody’s listening” (#1 31). Contra the dystopian surface world, Bat-Man’s Batcave is an alternative social matrix – a bat-topia (i.e., “topos” (place) + bat) – that facilitates the social dreaming and social reform that inform *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*.

This shift towards changing the world via utopian social dreaming and social action is atypical because, as Matthew Wolf-Meyer argues, superhero narratives are predominantly conservative and typically entrench the status quo. Superheroes may envision a better world but “the vast majority of superheroes are intent on retaining the status quo subservient to the popular politics and will of the people they endeavor to protect” (501). Citing Richard Reynolds’s *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Coogan similarly notes that “[s]uperheroes put their individuality, as expressed in their superidentities and costumes, fully in service of the status quo by beating back any challenges to it” (203). Coogan even argues that being proactive is typically antithetical to the superhero genre because proactivity “seems to cause a shift in narrative strategy from the superhero formula and towards a use of the superhero as metaphor, along the lines of literary fiction” (115).

Miller’s Superman is clearly the status-quo superhero with his anti-utopian stoicism and failure to “uphold the philosophical responsibility that Friedrich Nietzsche thought so vital to the position of the übermensch, whose purpose was to ‘go under,’ to bring humanity the lessons learned, metaphysical or otherwise, as post-humans, in an attempt to affect utopia” (Wolf-Meyer 501). On the other hand, Bat-Man literally ”goes under” in Wolf-Meyer’s Nietzschean manner, when he buries Batman and Bruce Wayne and uses the bat-topia to inaugurate social reform, thereby becoming a criminal in the eyes of the corrupt administration and its agents. This mix of (super)heroism and “criminalism” is a culmination of Bat-Man’s *raison d’être*. Superman reflects on an earlier conversation on this subject, with “You were the one they used against us, Bruce. The one who played it rough. When the noise from the parents’ groups and the sub-committee called us in for questioning – you were the one who laughed...that scary laugh of yours...’Sure we’re criminals,’ you said. ‘We’ve always been criminals. We have to be criminals’” (Returns 135). *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* mirrors this dialogue in Book Three when Hal Jordan, the Green Lantern, returns to help Earth in its blackest night and muses, “Bruce. You were right. When you laughed in our faces, all those years ago – when you called the rest of us fools – you were right. Of course we’re criminals. We’ve always been criminals. On this planet we have to be criminals” (57). The Dark Knight is both reactive and proactive in the *Dark Knight* arc. Batman reacts (as a superhero) to the crime-ridden streets of Gotham in *The Dark Knight Returns* but eventually becomes the
proactive (utopian literary metaphor) Bat-Man of The Dark Knight Strikes Again, fighting to wrestle control of the dystopian world from its shadow rulers.

Bat-Man is motivated to "go under" (and rise again) to effect utopian social change for humanity. Consequently, the Dark Knight arc moves beyond the classic dystopian literary tradition, one that presents the ills of this global gotham, to emerge as a critical dystopia. Raffaella Baccolini explains that since the classic dystopia is "a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope within the story, utopia (in the sense of utopian hope) is maintained in dystopia only outside the story: It is only if we consider dystopia as a warning, that we as readers can hope to escape such a pessimistic future" (18). The critical dystopia rejects "the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel" and goes on to "open a space of contestation and opposition" within the diegesis (Baccolini 18). Tom Moylan stresses in Scraps of the Untainted Sky that critical dystopias "go on to explore ways to change the present system...but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few" (189). The critical dystopia then seeks to "depict fictional realities which are, to different degrees, discontinuous with the contemporary 'real' (although such realities are drawn in relation to, and as a critique of, the world as we know it)" (Cavalcanti, qtd. in Moylan 192).

The bat-topia in the Dark Knight arc is the physical space of contestation and oppositional energy, a matrix for a social movement that dominates The Dark Knight Strikes Again. Miller even goes so far as to diffuse (super)heroism and allow it to be taken up by the general population. An unmasked Bat-Man calls for the general populace to "pull on your tights and give them hell" and to "grab hold of a fad – a fleeting fashion trend – and turn it into a revolution" (#2 78). This social revolution then forms the backdrop for The Dark Knight Strikes Again as newsbulletins report on costume-clad citizens overturning the police state, tearing down a repressive social regime, and exercising oppositional energy and agency. One celebrity says, "we could be witness to a profound change in human history, here. This is totally millennial. These heroes offer us a fresh start – toward a better world! A brighter tomorrow!" (#3 73).

The satirical artwork of The Dark Knight Strikes Again is also foundational to this critical dystopia. Moylan quotes Ildney Cavalcanti’s explanation of satiric exaggeration as a fundamental feature of the critical dystopia, a feature "founded upon oblique relations implying 'hidden' meanings and 'deviations' from normal usage" (qtd. in Moylan 192). Related, Jane Donawerth quotes Alvin Kernan's work on satire in a manner useful to this discussion, saying, "Satire employs plain, blunt language and rough style (especially invective, caricature, burlesque, and disease imagery). In satire, the ideal is only glimpsed, and the grotesque in society is emphasized" (40). While The Dark Knight Returns is saturated by an "intense level of realism" (Klock 29), Lynn Varley’s vibrant colours and Miller’s cartoonish artwork mark The Dark Knight Strikes Again as visual satire. This second series in the overall arc is Cavalcanti’s catachresis or Kernan’s satire, as caricaturized (and superficial) media figures frenetically switch from one story to the next with neither critical insight nor debate. The moral breakdown and break-up of “Superchix,” a superhero-cum-Spice Girls band, is as initially frightening to the general population as an alien invasion. Political debates turn into shouting matches with the (Rush Limbaugh-inspired) moderator yelling for everyone else to shut up and pay attention to him and naked newscasters are indistinguishable from advertisements for “uforia investments,” a company that will “never let your stocks go flaccid” (3). While we do not get to see the world that replaces the dystopian nightmare that has dominated the Dark Knight arc
(itself a narrative strategy common to the critical dystopia) and two heroes – The Green Arrow and The Question – debate the (de)merits of populism and dictatorships, utopian fruition isn't really the end-point of this literary form. The point of the Dark Knight arc lies not in depicting the final emergence of a eutopia from dystopia so much as social critique and utopianism's resilience even in the face of darkness. As Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris argue in "Heroes and Superheroes," superheroes "can remind us of the importance of self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and expending ourselves for something good, noble, and important. They can broaden our mental horizons and support our moral determination, while also entertaining us" (Loeb and Morris 16).

Figure 4. The Dark Knight Strikes Again #2
p. 5 © Frank Miller and Lynn Varley

"These heroes offer us a fresh start – toward a better world! A brighter tomorrow!" – The Dark Knight Strikes Again #3

Despite the significant stylistic differences between The Dark Knight Returns and The Dark Knight Strikes Again, the Dark Knight arc is founded on key utopian elements – utopianism, negative utopia, critical dystopia and anti-utopia. While The Dark Knight Returns might be somewhat dated in its surface details of Soviet tension and Reaganomics and the narrative/visual structure of The Dark Knight Strikes Again may be off-putting, the ongoing strength of the Dark Knight arc has to do with its exploration of the Bat-Man, the efficacy of individual agency and heroism, the critique of curtailed civil liberties and the inspirational function of mythology and utopianism. The political and social critique of the Dark Knight arc is diverse. America's seemingly empty mythology, social reform sacrificed for social retrenchment, domestic security paid for by the retracting of civil liberties, Presidential hyperreality and the misogynistic sexualization of popular media are all issues whose topicality is even more pronounced in a contemporary post-9/11 climate. The Dark Knight arc can be read as challenging the reader to question whether s/he will maintain a Superman-inspired anti-utopian stoicism in the face of social injustice, a position that is perhaps less demanding since acquiescence is often easier than action, or whether s/he will engage in a Bat-Man inspired struggle for social dreaming and social transformation. In essence, Miller's Dark Knight arc uses superhero metaphors to explore the limits and limitations of utopianism and to challenge individuals to throw off anti-utopian resignation and carry the torch of utopian social change.
The Dark Knight Returns trade paperback that is referenced in this essay collects and organizes (with continuous pagination) the series originally published under the following titles: The Dark Knight Returns (Book One); The Dark Knight Triumphant (Book Two); Hunt the Dark Knight (Book Three); and, The Dark Knight Falls (Book Four).

The relationship between (American) mythology and superheroes is well documented. In Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre, Peter Coogan maps the connections between Golden Age comic books, circa late-1930s/early-1940s, and classical mythology (116-25) while Will Brooker meticulously shows the Dark Knight's resilience as an image of American cultural identity. Brooker quotes comic book scribe and Batman editor Denny O’Neill: “Batman and Robin are the postindustrial equivalent of folk figures. They are much deeper in our collective psyches than I had thought. Because these characters have been around for fifty years, everybody in the country knows about them. They have some of the effect on people that mythology used to” (41). Miller has also broached this topic: “superheroes are ‘gods,’ not the ones we worship, but more like mythological gods who live among us” (Sanderson).

Throughout The Dark Knight Returns, the artwork perpetually shades Superman, suggesting he has indeed declined in stature, importance, and inspiration: he is a beacon of (super)heroism no longer.

The anti-utopia is not to be confused with the dystopia. Unlike the negative utopia which still features some form of utopian hope, even if that hope rests with the reader, the anti-utopia eschews utopianism because it is “a utopia that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia” (Sargent 2).

This issue of masques is a defining element in Christopher Nolan's Batman Begins. At the end of the movie Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) has learned about Bruce Wayne's Batman identity and approaches Bruce (Christian Bale). They have the following conversation: "I never stopped thinking about you. About us. Then when I heard you were back I started to hope. But then I found out about your mask." "My mask is just a symbol, Rachel." "No this [touching Bruce's face]...this is your mask. Your real face is the one criminals now fear. The man I loved, the man who vanished, he never came back at all. But maybe he's still out there somewhere. Maybe someday when Gotham no longer needs Batman I'll see him again."

This is an homage to the Dark Knight's first publication in Detective Comics #27 (1939). Interior artwork depicts the appearance of the "Bat-Man," but this hyphenate was quickly dropped. See Les Daniels’s Batman: The Complete History for sample artwork.

President Rickard (a.k.a. The Prez) is Miller's cue to Prez (1973), DC's four-issue series about the ascension of Prez Rickard to the Oval Office following a Nixon backlash and constitutional amendments that allowed an eighteen year-old boy to run for the Presidency. As the entry in The DC Comics Encyclopedia explains, Prez Rickard "used the powers of his office to stop a new Cold War and preach a new breed of pacifism." Equally important, he possessed "a sunny, enthusiastic, and optimistic outlook on life that makes people instinctively want to trust him" (245). In Miller's universe, his sunny disposition, optimism, pacifism, and desire to make the world a better place — i.e., his utopianism — is merely a façade for Luthor's dystopian machinations. Prez Rickard also appears sporadically in other DC/Vertigo comic books, notably Neil Gaiman's Sandman series.

Unfortunately, the critical dystopia material is embarrassed by a nonsensical sub-plot about Dick Grayson's vengeful return as Robin. Equally embarrassing is the insulting depiction of Wonder Woman. Although Wonder Woman is an extremely powerful Amazon princess, her sole purpose is to sexually invigorate a physically and emotionally battered Superman. After healing Superman and getting pregnant for the second time, Wonder Woman is then reduced to witnessing Captain Marvel's death (under the urban detritus of a devastated Metropolis that is reminiscent of New York's Ground Zero) or worrying about her daughter, Kara, when she goes off with her super-powered Kryptonian father.

References

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A bat flapping through an open window was deemed an omen, and the original tale’s end caption heralded, “And thus is born this weird avenger of the dark...this avenger of evil. The Batman.” Batman was an immediate sensation. In his earliest adventures (he was alternately called “Bat-Man” until the hyphen was dropped for consistency), Batman was quite brutal: he tossed a thug off a rooftop and executed a vampire by shooting him with a silver bullet. As Batman’s acclaim swelled, the character’s publisher recoiled, fearful that the sinister elements in the comic book would be emulated by its youn Dark (K)Night Atmospheres: The Climate of Fear. TDKR is climatically given to horror and fear. It is not accidental that the four part series is at both ends concerned with the weather and environment: a scorching summer ('The Dark Knight Returns') and a (limited) nuclear winter ('The Dark Knight Falls'), the first leading to excessive violence and crime, the last leading to excessive magnetic pulses that ruins electrical activity all over the US and converts an entire desert. (4) Throughout Miller’s harrowing recreation of Batman, he delves into the ecological and psychogeographical effects of vigilante culture and metropolitan civilizations. TDKR opens with three crucial environment-related images in its first pages. The first is the representation of Gotham city baking in the heat. With Dark Knight III releasing today, we take a complete look back at Frank Miller’s Dark Knight mythology and its impact on other Batman media. Eager to pick up what may very well prove to be one of the last chapters in this alternate history of the Bat? Just curious for a quick primer before Zack Snyder’s version of the material arrives in movie theaters next spring? Come on along as we delve into The Complete Guide to Frank Miller’s Dark Knight. - Batman: Year One. Year published: 1987Number of issues: FourFormat: Story arc within the main Batman monthly series.