

## Leather Wings and Broken Things: How the Trauma at the Heart of Batman's Character Creates Sidekicks Out of His Readers.

Through his 80-year history, much has been said about the fictional origins of Batman. The story of how Bruce Wayne went from a scared little boy, cowering in the streets after the murder of his parents, to the avenging figure of the night and protector of Gotham City that is Batman. Writers such as Fingerhuth and Brooker have examined the effects the traumatic events of his childhood have on Bruce Wayne. However, little has been said about how his origin story affects the reader. That by understanding and reading Batman's stories, the reader takes on a sidekick role, particularly when it comes to readers who have experienced traumatic events. To examine this, we need to look at Batman's origin, particularly Miller's *Batman Year One* [Miller & Mazzucchelli.1987], the fan created *Something Terrible* [Trippe.2016] by Trippe, and the currently incomplete *Creature of the Night* [Busiek & Leon: 2017-Present] by Busiek.

Bruce Wayne's story of dealing with his trauma is compelling. Originally told in 1939's *Detective Comics #33* [Finger & Kane.1939], a young Bruce witnesses his parents shot by a lone mugger one night in Crime Alley. Despite his age, after the incident he promises to become the enemy of crime, even though by doing so, he relives the experience every night. Early in the character's publication, Batman becomes the mentor to his first of many disciples. Dick Grayson, the first Robin. Much like Bruce, Dick witnesses the death of his parents, but is taken into the care of Batman. In the book, *The Caped Crusade* [Weldon.2016], Weldon describes Robin as being 'half the story', as it adds the father figure role to Bruce. As Weldon states, "Batman's status as the ultimate mentor is a base principle, in as much as it speaks directly to who he is: he saves others because on one terrible night long ago, there was no one to save him" [Weldon.2016:037]. His father figure status doesn't just apply to the Robins or his other sidekicks, however. It reaches through the panel and beyond to us the readers. We, just as Robin did, have the capacity to become those sidekicks and learn from Bruce's example as someone overcoming their own trauma. To improve ourselves, and to become a person who works for a better future. As readers, we share much in common with the Robins, especially in comparison to the citizens of Gotham that Batman protects. Like Robin, we see the quiet and private moments of Bruce's life. We know why he is Batman. Our common knowledge of him is hidden to the rest of his world.

Batman's origin has been reiterated by many creators in multiple mediums. But the most heavily noted and referenced is the telling in Frank Miller's *Batman Year One* [Miller & Mazzucchelli.1987]. While the book chronicles Bruce's first year as Batman and his return to Gotham eighteen years after his parent's murder. A hard hitting and memorable moment within the book is Bruce reflecting on the night of the shooting. It's stated in the book that Bruce is seven years old when the murder took place. According to Piaget's theory of the Stages of Cognitive Development, this puts Bruce in a crucial stage of his mental development. Falling right at the end of the Preoperational Stage and at the beginning of the Concrete Operational Phase. According to Piaget, during the Preoperational Stage, "young children can think about things symbolically. This is the ability to make one thing – a word or an object – stand for something other than itself" [McLeod.2018]. For Bruce, he made the very idea of crime and the object of a gun embody the reality and pain of his parent's death. The Concrete Stage is considered the most important in a child's development, it "marks the beginning of logical or operational thought" [McLeod.2018]. The child, in this case Bruce, is beginning to work

things out around him entirely in his mind, rather than primary action. In *Cognitive Behavioural Treatment for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma* [Smucker & Dancu.1999], Smucker and Dancu discuss how “trauma stops the chronological clock and [fixes] the traumatic moment in memory and imagination.” “These traumatic memories become fixed and the intense vehement emotions interfere with their natural processing” [Smucker & Dancu.1999:011]. Given Bruce’s age at the time of the murder, it’s reasonable to say that he is essentially stunted and frozen in that moment in time.

In his work, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* [Reynolds.1992], Reynolds discusses how all of Batman’s adventures stem from that night in crime alley. “Every Batman story is to some extent an extension of the origin story, as Batman’s motivation is wholly derived from the trauma of witnessing his parents shot in cold blood” [Reynolds.1992:067]. With what we know about his mental development at that point in time, it’s no surprise to find that this is the case given how vividly the trauma haunts him. As Smucker and Dancu state, Bruce is mentally frozen in that moment.

As readers, we find ourselves drawn to his continuing adventures as it demonstrates a man fighting despite that pain, and regardless of how endless these trials may be. Bruce’s compulsion to act as a saviour and to take on a large amount of responsibility for the lives of others, outside of his sidekicks, can be seen in many classic stories. Though he is also very aware of how fallible that role can be. In *Batman Gothic* [Morrison & Jansom.1990], Bruce thinks back on his time in boarding school, and a terrible headmaster who would frequently beat students. When his father comes to get him, he describes Thomas Wayne as a knight in shining armour. Clearly giving Thomas a deep level of admiration. Tragically, the book heavily implies that this is also the day of the murder. Bruce sees the man that in his eyes is the ultimate protector, taken from him in a matter of moments. In *Batman Venom* [O’Neil & Von Eeden.1991], Batman feels the other side of this. As the story begins, he fails to save a young girl. He states to Alfred, “She died. I was too weak to save her” [...] “I was right. But I wasn’t strong enough” [O’Neil & Von Eeden.1991:05]. Despite the girl being kidnapped by another person, it’s Bruce that feels the guilt. Fingeroth debates this guilt and how it stems from his origin, “Thomas and Martha’s death seemed to be without rhyme or reason. A death like that would only lead a young boy to feel responsible for not protecting them, and perhaps even that their deaths were his fault” [Fingeroth.2004:065].

Through his adventures, we can very clearly see that he does harbour a tremendous amount of guilt due to his trauma. Something many can sympathise or empathise with. For those recovering from traumatic situations, it can feel similar. Reminders seem to occur through everyday life, with it feeling as frequent as the latest adventure hits the Dark Knight. Bruce experiences this most clearly in *Dark Knight Returns* [Miller.1986], where despite his retirement and older age, reminders are still deeply vivid. The moment finally spurring him on into putting the cape and cowl back on, being the simple fact that *The Mark of Zorro* [Mamoulia.1940], the film he and his parents were out to see the night of the murder, is playing on tv. When discussing *Year One’s* depiction of this, Weldon describes Miller’s process as “looking for aspects of Batman’s origin that hadn’t yet been explored”, as it truly hadn’t up until the book’s publication, despite the Forty-Eight years between *Year One* and *Detective Comics #33*. “He left the murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents more or less alone, reducing it, as he had in *The Dark Knight Returns*, to stark flashes of imagery to evoke how vividly it lived in Bruce Wayne’s memory” [Weldon.2016:141]. After Bruce’s first attempt at crime fighting fails, the book depicts him sitting in his father’s chair, begging for an answer to what to do next. Despite the eighteen years between the murder and him sitting in the chair, the shadow of that day still hangs over him. The strength and power of these pages almost loom over the reader, much like the Bat

that comes to greet Bruce. Tragedy and trauma created the Dark Knight. We see his many attempts to work through it and become a better version of himself. When he sees someone going through the very situation that made him, he strives to guide them through it.

In *Detective Comics #38* [Finger & Kane.1940], readers were introduced to Dick Grayson. During the issue, Bruce witnesses first hand a boy going through the very tragedy he seeks to end. While performing with his family, a group of trapeze artists known as 'The Flying Graysons', Dick witnesses his parents fall and die due to the ropes being tampered with. Fingerroth notes that, "Robin too, was a victim of crime" [...] "Yet Robin seems to have little of the bitter angst that fuels Batman." [...] "Robin has Batman, a figure who has stood in his shoes, to help him along the difficult times ahead, to give him purpose" [Fingerroth.2004:065]. Due to having a figure such as Batman to guide him, it can be argued that Dick Grayson is a far more secure and grounded person for having Bruce in his life. As readers, we can see ourselves in Robin's shoes. We can use him as an entry point to learn from Bruce as though we ourselves are the sidekick. Weldon notes that the addition of Robin was a fundamental and permanent change that placed Batman in a new role of Protector and provider" [Weldon.2016:035]. A role that he was already trying to fulfil for his city but brought down to a more significant and tangible level. Looking at the issues between *Detective Comics #27* and *#33*, you can see a clear change in how Batman communicates his thought process. When discussing narrative in his book *Into the Woods* [Yorke.2013], Yorke discusses the archetypal protagonist and how we as the reader learn alongside them. "The assimilation of knowledge is in the very cells of drama – a character's flaw is merely knowledge not yet learned. In seeking to rectify that flaw the story progresses, with the character's gradual learning imitating the process of perception" [Yorke.2013:213]. A reader going through the stories seeking, whether purposefully or accidentally, a role model to how to navigate their lives despite trauma or abuse, can view themselves in the mould of Robin. A sidekick and protégé to Batman.

A real-world example of a reader taking on this role is the creator Dean Trippe. As a child, Trippe experienced sexual abuse at the hands of someone he trusted, while being held at gunpoint. In 2013, he published the autobiographical web comic, *Something Terrible* [Trippe.2016], about his experience, and how Batman has helped him through such a traumatic experience and continues to inspire him. In 2016, the comic was physically published by Iron Circus Comics. This new edition includes an afterword by Trippe where he explains what it felt like for him to learn Batman's origin story through the 1989 film, *Batman* [Burton.1989]. "When Michael Keaton flashed back to his childhood trauma, it struck a chord in me I didn't think I could've articulated at the time" [Trippe.2016:17]. For Trippe, seeing Bruce Wayne's origin gave him the power to understand how he was feeling about his own situation. It helped him to feel much less alone in his situation, something his comic has gone on to do for others.

Much like Robin, Trippe used Batman as an inspiration and role model as to how to best deal with his trauma. When discussing the real impact Batman had on his life, Trippe states that "the story of Batman helped me realize that I could wrap it around my arms like a security blanket. Or a cape. I put a yellow oval on my chest, an innocent light now defended by a creature more powerful than anything criminals could throw at me" [Trippe.2016:18]. Fingerroth echoes this mentality in his book *Superman on the Couch*, by stating that "trauma is by definition devastating to one's well-being and sense of stability." [...] "But to indulge in fantasy while reading or watching the adventures of Batman can be an entrée into a version of ourselves that is extremely appealing. The superhero avatar enables us to be victim and protector at the same time. We get to save ourselves" [Fingerroth.2004:069]. Towards the end of Trippe's comic, he re-writes his own story. Instead of his

childhood self, alone in his room crying. The Tardis materialises in front of him with Batman stepping out to comfort him. A physical representation of the emotional comfort that can be found in the character.

DC seems greatly aware of the impact their characters have on their readers. In 2017, the first issue of the miniseries *Creature of the Night* [Busiek & Leon.2017–Present] hit the stands. *Creature of the Night* takes an approach similar to that of Busiek's previous work, *Superman: Secret Identity* [Busiek & Immonen.2004]. What if some of the events happened in our world, where comics and superheroes only exist on the page? With *Superman: Secret Identity*, the twist was simple. Make a boy named Clark Kent, who is resentful about being named after Superman, and give him Superman's powers. With *Creature of the Night*, we meet Bruce Wainwright. A young Batman fan in the late 60s who tragically loses both of his parents to a gunman. The story is partly told from Wainwright's perspective, with a flashback narration from his Uncle Alfred. The narration for Alfred clearly talks about how devoted Wainwright was to Batman and comics. Commenting that he'd even admitted to dreaming about being Batman at times [Busiek & Leon.2017:03]. However, Wainwright's narration is in the present tense. While we are getting information from Alfred about what has happened, we are seeing young Bruce's immediate thoughts in the moment. Through the story, we see that Wainwright believes there is a real connection between him and Batman. The name and family status, those around him named Alfred and Gordon. Towards the end of the first issue, Wainwright is visited by a bat like creature resembling Batman. While sat with him, Bruce thinks to himself, "I knew he didn't just up and decide to help me. I'd made him. I wanted someone like Batman. Someone who could make things like they're supposed to be. Make things fair. I wanted someone like Batman so much. I'd almost let it all go" [Busiek & Leon.2017:47]. Earlier on in the same issue, Wainwright blames himself for the death of his parents. That if he really was Batman, he'd have been able to do something.

Through issues two and three, we see Wainwright grow up, taking over his parent's business and trying to make a better world for those out there. While still continuing to find more connections between him and the fictional Bruce Wayne. His bat creature friend continues to fight crime with his assistance. While not as directly as Robin, Wainwright could very well be seen as the sidekick in this situation, despite being the 'Bruce Wayne' figure. His connection to the creature very much mirrors our own and Robin's with Batman. Finding so many similarities that inspire us, but not quite being the Dark Knight. In his book, *The Wow Climax*, media theorist Henry Jenkins discusses the use of comics in an interesting way, "Most of our stereotypes about comic fans start from the idea of arrested development, that is that the fans have somehow sought to pull themselves out of life processes and to enjoy the same kind of iterative existence as the guys and girls in tights" [Jenkins.2007:066]. For Wainwright, this becomes incredibly literal. In *Positive Fantasy and Motivation*, Oettingen discusses how fantasies are disconnected from the facts. That "fantasies more easily escape the grip of reality than expectations, because fantasies are not constrained by the cognitive mechanism that make people acknowledge factual information" [Oettingen.1996:04]. With Wainwright in this situation, it's possible that he creates this surrogate Batman as a way to continue his fantasies and try to accept what happened to him. Wainwright, primarily confirmed by Alfred, is convinced that his parent's death wasn't random. That they had to have happened for a reason. Using this surrogate Batman is his way of trying to make sense of the randomness of life and the tragedy.

Many of us have our own stories of times we've taken comfort in fiction. Whether it's as a distraction for stressful times, or they have provided life lessons when we've needed them most. With Batman, the tragedy at the heart of his character provides many of us with the light we need in the darkest of times. An example to follow and a beacon of hope. In *Dark Nights Metal*, Batman describes the Bat signal as just that for the people of Gotham. "It meant it was time to cut through the fear and mystery and find answers" [Snyder & Capullo.2018:104]. In the real world, it's any sort of Batman iconography that can do that. To quote Glen Weldon, "This is Batman now: an idea that's been freed of its grim n' gritty moorings to absorb a host of meanings and resonances across the emotional spectrum." [...] "That selfless oath is what matters about Batman, and it is the reason he will continue to matter, whatever form he may take in the decades to come. Because Batman is the story every one of us, nerd and normal alike, tells ourselves when they seem at their worst" [Weldon.2016:285]. We may not all wear green spandex. We may not sport a domino mask. But it doesn't take a costume to make a hero, and we don't have to be Robin to learn from the Dark Knight.

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