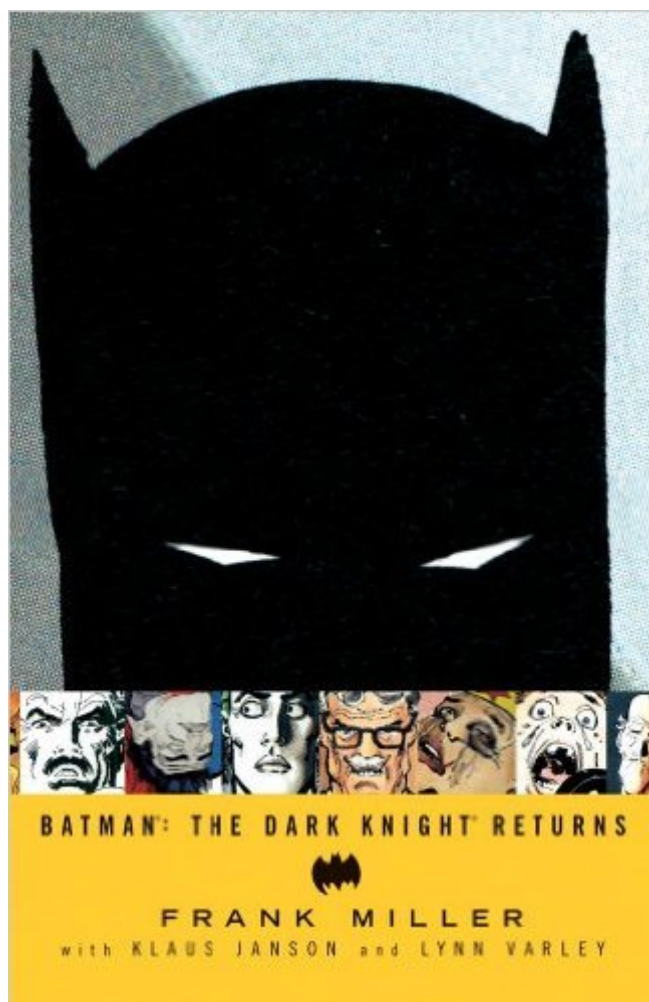


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Batman: The Dark Knight Returns



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER! It is ten years after an aging Batman has retired and Gotham City has sunk deeper into decadence and lawlessness. Now as his city needs him most, the Dark Knight returns in a blaze of glory. Joined by Carrie Kelly, a teenage female Robin, Batman takes to the streets to end the threat of the mutant gangs that have overrun the city. And after facing off against his two greatest enemies, the Joker and Two-Face for the final time, Batman finds himself in mortal combat with his former ally, Superman, in a battle that only one of them will survive. This collection is hailed as a comics masterpiece and was responsible for the launch of the Batman movies. This volume collects Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1-4.

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Customer Reviews

It's amazing how well this story, originally written as a 4-part mini-series in 1986, has held up. This story is responsible for the re-emergence of Batman not just as a superhero, but as a tortured anti-hero with flaws that make him no less obsessed than the supervillains he hunts. Not only do we get heaping servings of the dark, obsessed Batman, we also meet an him as an older man, a true "lion in winter" who must come to grips with his mortality and the unstoppable decline of age. Miller allows us to use our hero to perceive the world around us, and in doing so *The Dark Knight Returns* also ends up as a critique of 20th century society (and 21st, for that matter). Batman is just a few public opinion points away from being considered no different than the likes of Two-Face and the Joker. The relationships between Batman and those he hunts is simply outstanding work by Frank Miller. Generally, there are three types of villains. The first are everyday thugs that are shallow and

meaningless both in dialogue and mentality. The second is a savage gang leader. Powerfully built, full of rage and singularly focused hate often seen in the young, this character forces Batman to confront his own mortality and, in an awesome final confrontation, turn to the experience of age for victory. But the most powerful relations come with Batman and his fights with the classic supervillains Two-Face and The Joker. In one really powerful scene, Batman realizes he is equally as tortured as Two-Face, but with one difference: Two-Face feels remorse and despair for what he has once again become (One panel has him actually jumping off a skyscraper, in a possible suicide attempt). He has received redemption from society as well as himself, but was unable to maintain it from either. In contrast, Batman, has accepted what he has become, and revels in his darkness. And then of course, there's my favorite, The Joker. We have here an excellent portrayal of a supervillain with no conscience whatsoever, who commits evil deeds not for any agenda or flawed goal, but simply because he enjoys doing them. His ending scene with Batman is another one to remember, and I can't imagine it happening any other way. The supporting cast in the graphic novel are also superbly detailed. Superman is portrayed as equal parts god, innocent child, tortured soul, government flunky, dumb jock, and a lampoon of the comic industry's idea of superheroes as flawless humans. The interesting point is, Miller creates a Superman that is not to be mocked, but understood and even sympathized with. His contrast with Batman benefits the development of both characters. Other characters, including a naive yet gifted Robin, a Gordon who is more fully fleshed-out as a cop than anything you'll see on NYPD Blue or Law and Order, and Green Arrow, who has become the epitome of grizzled in a novel full of grizzled ornery old men. By now, I think you can guess I kind of liked it. Frank Miller has published here a brilliant novel. If the Gods of Hollywood are truly kind, perhaps one day this will be converted into a movie. The excessive use of Batman-as-narrator increases the difficulty of writing a screenplay, but the plot is not only flawless, it is still relevant. Miller, in 1986 mind you, points out how America has a love affair with celebrities (including superheroes), public perception, a fascination with criminals, and how modern media loves to praise heroes (and successful people in general) only to aid in their entertaining downfall from public grace. By the end of the graphic novel, with some of the most original artwork for its time (notice how good the story is that I didn't even mention how it looks until now?), Miller has us realizing we have experienced a story that explains obsession, public perception, conscience, mortality, and what it truly means to be a hero better than any psychology textbook could, and I am including those textbooks with the pictures.

One of the problems with writing about a genre classic nearly fifteen years after its original release

is that so many will have tried to surpass it since then (mostly unsuccessfully). Such is the case with Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*. In the wake of superior product like Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* and *From Hell*, inferior product like McFarlane's insipid *Spawn* series, and middling product like Miller's own *Sin City* limiteds, it's hard to understand what a splash was made by *The Dark Knight Returns* on its original release. Even in light of Miller's work on classics like *Ronin*, *Elektra: Assassin*, and the great *Wolverine* limited series, *Dark Knight* was something special, something so dark and twisted and mature, it all but demanded that the rest of the genre mature toward its standard, and almost literally forced establishment critics to take the genre seriously at last. No small feat, especially when considering the character Miller chose to work with -- after all, Batman to most people meant Adam West hitting Cesar Romero with a resounding POW! Not exactly the best way to reenergize a medium, right? Except Miller did it -- boy, did he ever. *Dark Knight* was and is one of the most powerful pieces of comic art it's ever been my privilege to own. From the Miller/Janson team's gritty illustrative style, expertly suited to the material, to Lynn Varley's exquisite sense of color and mood, to Miller's expertly-written story, *Dark Knight* is everything a graphic novel should be. Take as just one for-instance the story: It's a brilliant reimagining and reinterpretation of the entire Batman mythos, bridging the gap between every era of the Masked Manhunter's long career, from the dark noir of the early days, through the "Boy Scout" period of the forties and fifties, and even a little of the "science fiction" and tv-era Batman (though thankfully not much of either), and on to the modern *Dark Knight Detective* period. Miller takes Bruce Wayne into his mid-fifties, retired but still troubled in his heart, and sets up a chain of circumstances which force Batman's emergence from that retirement, even as Jim Gordon is being forced out of his job, Two-Face is supposedly "cured" by self-aggrandizing doctors, and the deadly Mutant gang, a "purer breed" of criminal, practically owns the streets of Gotham. Miller ties all of these disparate elements together in unique ways, and weaves from them a story so enthralling, and so full of mythical echoes, that few have been able to equal it, even today. As one example of the mythical resonances in *Dark Knight*, have a look at Miller's dramatic depiction of Batman's old pal Superman. Here the "big blue schoolboy" (as one of the characters hilariously describes him) is shown as Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster always meant him to be: an earthbound god among mortals. One panel in particular is key to this image: Superman holding the tank up over his head (with the memorable caption, "We must not remind them that giants walk the Earth."), a very dramatic (and very deliberate) redrawing of the cover of *Action Comics #1*. The panel is meant to remind us of the basic difference between DC's two primary exponents: Batman is a mere costumed crimefighter, but Superman is, well, Super, man! From Part 3 on, the conflict between the two characters seems inevitable, and promises to be

spectacular. Then there is the Batman himself -- and here Miller has done something so astounding it beggars description. For example, consider Bruce Wayne's intensely-rendered flashback to his parents' murder, done in a series of still-frame-like panels, with no dialogue, narration or sound effects, just the horrifying images: a finger tightening on a trigger, Thomas Wayne's huge hand falling away from his shocked son, the strand of pearls splitting apart as the gun is fired again -- this is a dark sort of visual poetry, so immediate and visceral it makes you understand at last just why Bruce Wayne was so damaged in those fleeting, horrifying moments. Similarly, the HUGE bat crashing through Bruce's window (symbolizing the futility of resisting destiny, the second coming of Batman, the spirit of "the finest warrior, the purest survivor" and about a half-dozen other things), takes Bob Kane's original idea and expands it once more into the realm of myth -- this is not just a bat but a Bat, the soul and spirit of something bigger than Bruce Wayne, Gotham City, or even Superman himself. This is the stuff, as Alan Moore once noted, of legend. There's so much else in this rich tale, from brilliant caricatures of David Letterman, Ronald Reagan, and Dr. Ruth (not to mention a totally undeserved slam at Harlan Ellison -- "eating our babies for breakfast," indeed!), to Miller's brilliant reimagining of Robin (no longer a boy wonder but a girl wonder!), that 1000 words simply can't shower Dark Knight with enough praise. If you're a Bat-fan, this volume should definitely be in your collection. If not, it will make you see what you've been missing. In any event, what are you sitting around reading this for? You could be reading Dark Knight instead! Waste no more time!

In a phrase, *The Dark Knight Returns* is simply a "western." The old hero comes out of retirement to save his town one last time. On his way, he meets an assortment of old acquaintances, both friend and foe. At the end, there's a nice sunset for him to ride off into. Or is there? Frank Miller's book is more of a character study of a retired vigilante who just can't take it anymore. Think "Unforgiven" with tights and thermite. Like *Arkham Asylum*, this is a story of a man and his obsession. Miller's text puts us into that moment, and also reveals his doubts about his chosen calling. Batman here is a man divided, the reluctant hero, and he behaves as such. THIS Batman even realizes that his personal moral code may be suspect. (But never for long.) And the fact that he seems to be instrumental in bringing the Joker out of a catatonic state is telling. Do we beget our own demons? The story questions this repeatedly, and leaves it to us. Fleshed out not only with cameos, but with a new Robin, a new Commissioner, and several other characters, this is a true work of literature and art. Varley's coloring in particular electrifies this book. Worthy of addition to any serious collection, be it graphic novel or literature.

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