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Beneath the Cowl

Who Is Batman?



Adam West once asked me if I thought Batman was crazy. *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* is my answer.

Since his debut in 1939's *Detective Comics* #27, Batman has thrilled billions across the globe over time, and through a multitude of media. Of the world's three best-known comic book heroes—the bat, the spider, and the man from another planet, a trio of orphaned boys—he's the one who works by night, needs a car to get him into town, and is the most mortal. He's the superhero with no superpowers, the one we can most easily believe might inhabit our world. While his secret identity is the most fantastic of the three, one charmingly handsome billionaire living in a grand mansion on top of a vast cave versus two nebbishy newspaper employees, that fantastic wealth helps us accept his masked identity as something that feels real. Someone has to pay for those wonderful toys. The real world has more people known to be superrich than superpowered. Batman is the hero even adults can envision existing in real life, with less suspension of disbelief. Even though he has opportunities few people enjoy, Bruce Wayne hails from a city, not a mythical island or distant world, and he builds himself into a hero through training and hard work—no radiation, secret formula, or magic ring required.

His origin is tragic and brutally believable. It taps the most primal of our childhood fears: A family outing twists into tragedy when a mugger guns his parents down before his eyes.

His films among the highest-grossing in history, this character has starred in more movies and television series, both animated and live-action, than any other comic book hero. Why does this brooding vigilante, this tormented soul who stalks the streets looking for trouble, dressed like a vampire, fascinate us so? Duality and obsession, his enemies' and his own, fill his stories. His enemies reflect and distort facets of himself. He's smug, he's sly, he's so intimidating that he can enter a room full of people who can fly, read minds, cast spells, or run faster than light, and yet they're the ones daunted by him—and that's what we love. Strong and smart, unfettered by fiscal limitations or anybody else's rules, he brings a deep wish of ours to life. Batman's the part of us that wants to scare all of life's bullies away.

In creating bright, shining Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster caught lightning in a bottle. One sleepless night, Jerry conceived "of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one—only more so."¹ Jerry and his artist friend Joe drew inspiration from divine heroes throughout the ages to create not just Superman himself, but the very concept of the costumed superhero. They made the meme. They launched modern mythology.² Superman became an immediate hit. On the heels of that first caped hero's success, publishers scrambled to concoct more. Superman's publisher hired young cartoonist Bob Kane to generate their next costumed do-gooder.³ Ahead of all the upcoming Superman imitations, Kane and his collaborator Bill Finger pulled not from the superhuman figures who'd inspired Jerry and Joe, but instead from the dark mystery-men of silent movies and pulp fiction, most notably Zorro and the Shadow, extraordinary men but men nonetheless. Where Superman drew his might from Earth's sun, Batman found his in a city's darkness.* Jerry and Joe played with the bright and impossible; Bob and Bill expanded that meme by adding the coin's other side, the dark and improbably possible.

*"The first light had cast the first shadow."—Grant Morrison (2011), 26.

Nobody today gets to read that first Batman story without already knowing that the vigilante puzzling authorities will turn out to be the bored rich boy who spends his time, up until the final panel, as Commissioner Gordon's literary foil, a sounding board to whom Gordon can voice his thoughts—no more than we might scratch our heads over a classic Robert Louis Stevenson novel because we can't figure out mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll's connection to that lout Mr. Hyde. We know the name and face of the man behind the mask, but what lurks behind the face? The question "*Who is Batman?*" strikes deeper than Batman's cowl, Bruce Wayne's façade, or any name he chooses to use. It's a *who* question packed with *why*: Why does he fight crime? Why as a vigilante? Why the mask, the bat, and the underage partner? Why are his most intimate relationships with "bad girls" he ought to lock up? And why won't he kill that homicidal, green-haired clown?

Does Batman have bats in his belfry?



Right to left: Bat-Films executive producer Michael Uslan, *Batman* television actor Adam West, and psychologist/superherologist Travis Langley discuss Batman and the Joker at San Diego Comic-Con International. Photo by Alex Langley.