



FRANK MILLER Long Day's Journey into Knight

Frank Miller is a man obsessed. In that sense, he's not far removed from the vigilante protagonist of his seminal comic *The Dark Knight Returns*, which at its release 15 years ago breathed new life into the superhero genre and redefined Batman as a legend, not a punch line. Nor is he all that different from his fans, who view the recent release of the long-awaited sequel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* as an event just shy of the Second Coming. But Miller's obsession is a simple one: He wants to help make comic books great again. A&F's Sean T. Collins asked him how he plans to do it.

You're finishing up *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, which, I think it's safe to say, is the most eagerly anticipated comic in history. [Laughs] I refer to it as my suicide mission. I love the way it's shaping up, I think it's a really nifty comic, but at the same time, how do you compete with somebody's memories from when they were 10 years old? But what I'm up to is not just a repetition. This has a completely different tone and approach to the story. I'm a very different guy than I was 15 years ago, and these are very different times, and I'm approaching it with a whole different feel. Back then I was desperate to get people to take this stuff seriously. I guess what I'm after now is showing people just how nifty this stuff really is.

Going for a gee-whiz factor? There's definitely a gosh-wow factor here, but it's not nostalgia. It's not just "Weren't those comics great back in the old days when we were in swaddling clothes?" It's more just trying to bring everything I have as a craftsman to make this material work. There's all this wonderful stuff to play with, and I think it can be executed with a bit more verve than it often is. Nostalgia gets a little tired, doesn't it? I mean, how many times are you gonna say, "Look! Up in the sky!" Been there. I think it's more a matter of reintroducing concepts. Sounds stupid, sounds simplistic, but all of these characters are based on one or two wishes. With Superman, it's flying; with the Atom, he gets little; with Flash, he's fast; with Green Lantern, he's got Aladdin's lamp. One thing I think that people in comics often fail to do is to boil down what that wish is and simply deliver on it. Batman? Throws bad guys out windows! Easy, you know? And I'm not saying, "Do Saturday-morning stuff"—you've got to work hard to make it work, to get people's blood up with the idea. But never lose sight of the fact that the idea itself is really good. I don't care about the Atom's marriage—I want to see him get so small that molecules are really big.

That's fascinating, because in the eyes of a lot of comics fans, you are associated with the whole "man behind the mask" thing. Yeah. I'm not trying to do some Tennessee Williams play in costume. I mean, that's not what this material is. **This is opera. It's got to be large.**

Superheroes don't become drunk drivers—they destroy planets. It's just a different scale. It's Wagnerian. You can play on themes that are very real in day-to-day life, but they all have to be translated into this larger-than-life mode. If I want to do naturalism, nobody's going to be wearing tights.

Even the stuff of yours that people say is more naturalistic, like your crime/noir stories in *Sin City*, has those elements. Right. *Sin City* is a very stylized, romantic piece of work, and intentionally so. It's called *Sin City* because these are love stories and morality plays, and you really can't

have virtue without sin. I think superhero stories are where this should be the most blatant. These have to be people who are arguing about what's right and wrong and fighting for what those versions are. I do believe that in the course of a romance or an adventure you can bring in elements of reality, emotional reality in particular. In fact, I believe that's what the genre is built for. I think that romance—and I mean this in the broadest sense of romance—is able to focus on these things more than the kind of gray, dull depression that often hits in fiction. I'm casting Superman in these stories as someone who's torn between duty and honor. It's very much about this hero in a tortured state.

A lot of criticism that's leveled at your work seems to come from people for whom duty and honor are just not terribly relevant concepts. Is that a problem for you—trying to get to people with this sort of jaded, post-modern sensibility? I think the fact that we have a term like postmodern is pretty hilarious. I really believe that ultimately my goal is to aim for the classic, I guess. But mostly I'm just having fun doing my job. I really love these stories; this is how I fantasize. I can't single out a particular genre or subgenre and say, "Okay, this is it. The rest don't count." I can't say, "Homer was okay with the *Iliad* but the *Odyssey* stank, because that had some fantasy stuff in it." I just kinda feel sorry for people whose view is so narrow, because it's a great big wide world out there, and there's a vast history of fiction that just can't be contained in a particular movement.

Are you concerned with how the entertainment field is reacting to recent events? I'm really dreading some of the things that are going to come out of both comics and Hollywood. Too much of it will be attempting to reassure. I want someone to do some pissed-off work. During World War II, our closest precedent to this, Hollywood produced some of its best, and most violent, movies. Whatever happens, I guarantee it'll be interesting.

In terms of art, do you select a style based on the story, or vice versa? It is mostly a case of the story influencing the style. The story has to come first. However, my dirty little secret here is that sometimes I come up with stories because I wanna draw stuff. In the case of *Sin City*, I like drawing vintage cars and tough guys in trench coats and women with very few clothes on. [Laughs] All these things kinda make their way into the story.

But you can't exactly go to Gotham City and see how Batman dresses. No, but on the other hand, I grew up with Superman cartoons and Batman comics, and that stuff's all on my hard drive. So even though I grew up in the farmlands of Vermont, I grew up in Gotham City.

Illustration by Josiah T. Leighton.