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Frank Miller on his 'Dark Knight Returns' 30 years later: 'I was rooting for Batman all the way'

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Full text: IT WAS "devastating," Frank Miller says. That is how the comics legend describes, with intentional hyperbolic flair, the event that helped him script and draw one of the greatest Batman tales ever told.

So you've got our attention, Mr. Miller. What was it that helped guide you to create "The Dark Knight Returns"?

Three decades ago, when he was 29, Miller says he was attempting to tell a type of Batman story that hadn't been seen before. Sure, he was nervous about bringing "The Dark Knight Returns" to fruition, but what bothered him more was his upcoming birthday.

"To me, [turning 30] was becoming an ancient. Batman had to absolutely be older than I was," Miller tells The Post's Comic Riffs. "Now, we all know Batman is eternally 29 [in the comics]. So I had to do something about it."

So Miller created his vision of Batman: older, wiser, edgier, a Dark Knight with battle scars and little patience for those who stood in his way. That version, of course, remains just as popular today as any current version of Batman.

"I made him as old as I could conceivably imagine a man could be," says Miller, explaining why he chose age 50. "And by doing that, I made him older than me. I made him a lot crankier, and was able to move him through time into a world that much more resembled the world that I lived in, in 1986 in New York City."

"I was updating the character and aging him at the same time. And I thought I was making him old and cranky. But I didn't learn what old and cranky was until I hit 50."

Now, DC Comics is celebrating the 30th anniversary of "The Dark Knight Returns: with a special commemorative edition. As he marks the milestone himself, Miller can still remember the nerves he felt when creating the story's concept and presenting it to people at DC, at that time had a different mindset as to what Batman was and represented.

The two most important authorities at DC in the mid-'80s, Miller says, were Paul Levitz and Jenette Kahn -- both of whom supported his "Dark Knight Returns" vision, he notes. It was the "lower-tier" people at DC that weren't as supportive. says Miller, explaining that many times, his editor would tell him: "Jenette and Paul will never approve this." But those at the top continually told Miller to keep going.

"Jenette and Paul were the ones that did approve it, and enthusiastically, and encouraged me to go further with the violence in it," Miller recounts. "It was the [other] people on the staff that resisted it, because I was playing with their childhood."

And Miller's alterations to the Bat-mythos didn't end with the Caped Crusader. Miller's Robin is one of the more recognizable characters from his Dark Knight story, in part because he took the "boy" out of Boy Wonder and made Robin more than a sidekick. Miller says that the idea to create Carrie Kelley -- whom the Maryland-born Miller considers Batman's adoptive daughter in "Dark Knight Returns" -- was sparked by a conversation with comics veteran John Byrne, while the two were flying to an Ohio comics convention.

"I told [Byrne] I had an idea for a Batman book where Batman was older and crankier....and he said make Robin a girl and he drew me a sketch," Miller recalls. "An idea of Robin as a girl, and how the costume would look better on a girl. The idea was so good I couldn't resist it. It just seemed natural from then on."

One of the memorable scenes in "The Dark Knight Returns" is the fight between the older Batman and Superman; the image of a Batman boot landing on Superman's jaw has stayed with fans for generations.
Miller vividly remembers plotting that famed fight, which inspired next month's "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice."

"Oh, yeah -- I so much wanted Batman to win, I can't tell you," Miller says. "I wanted the bad boy to win. I wanted the guy who got by just on his brains to take down the superpowered schoolboy. I was rooting for Batman all the way as I was writing and drawing the story. I got to have my guy win."

And what does Miller think of Ben Affleck, who is bringing Miller's older, angrier Batman to the screen?

"I'll be there in the audience -- I can't wait to see it," Miller says. "I hope it's good. I wish [Affleck] well."

Reflecting on the past 30 years, Miller can appreciate just what "The Dark Knight Returns" universe has become at DC, inspiring live-action films, animation and more comic-book tales -- including Miller's current Dark Knight III: The Master Race. And he can bask in the fact he got to deliver the Batman story he wanted to tell.

"I just mainly wanted to do my version of Batman and see if I could get it out, and see if anybody liked it," Miller says. "I had no idea what was coming or where it was going to go, and that there'd end up being so many of [stories]. It's been a real thrill ride."