

# BATMAN

## THE SUPER-SELL

Suddenly, British TV screens have been hit by a new phenomenon, Batman and Robin, figures from an American children's comic who have become objects of sophisticated modern folklore. How has this unlikely development come about? Untangling the Batman story, SUSAN LYDON found the main strand was economic.

**B**ATMAN and Robin the Boy Wonder have finally, months after a moderately - successful debut in the Midlands and South, arrived on London's tellies. Timed for a prime evening spot that will catch both adult and younger viewers and urged on by a massive promotional licensing campaign which has already authorised 125 official Bat-products for sale, the made-in-America show should do very well indeed.

Like it or not, Londoners are in for a long stand of uncompromising crime-fighting by the heroic duo. And yet the television series, despite columns of nostalgic punditry and analysis, has much less to do with the comic books of the late thirties and forties, which it apparently evokes, than it does with the aggressive salesmanship of the mid-sixties.

Having desperately sought a slightly more believable hero to rival National Comic Books' Superman, Detective Comic Books proudly announced its find in May 1939: "The Batman," a mysterious and adventuresome figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoer in his lone battle against the evil forces of society. . . . His identity remains unknown." Unknown, that was, to the other bizarre members of his world. Readers knew that Batman was really socialite Bruce Wayne, orphaned, as the first episode related, when a gunman shot both his parents as they were walking home from the cinema.

Pondering his fate years later in a silk smoking jacket before his baronial fireplace, Bruce decided to devote his life to fighting crime, not just with his muscles but with the creative intelligence that spawned innumerable Bat-devices and with the aid of his clean-cut and obedient ward Robin. It was all the in-

spired vision of an 18-year-old art student named Bob Kane and though Batman never quite achieved the absolute pre-eminence of Superman, thousands of pre-pubescent boys paid their money to retreat temporarily into a world where one punch could floor a host of villains and where every skyscraper had its convenient rope for Batman to swing unmussed into action.

### THE REBOUND

As Jules Feiffer, himself an avid reader and drawer of comic books, recalls in his book, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*: "The Batman school preferred a vulnerable hero to an invulnerable one. . . . Superman's superiority lay in the offence, Batman's lay in the rebound." Batman, undeniably human, could be hurt, though he seldom had more to show after a mauling than "a discreet patch of Band-Aid on his right shoulder." But, writes Feiffer, "who, having once noted Batman smart-assing his way through a fist fight, has not forever been taken with him?"

In the old days comics belonged to the kids. The ideal nice child beamed on by approving adults did not read them, and so, for those that did, the comics represented a rebellious retreat from adult authority to a realm where they, represented by their heroes, could be omnipotent. Robin was planned as a symbolic link of identification, though it did not work. Says Feiffer: "He was obviously an 'A' student, the center of every circle, the one picked for greatness in the crowd - God, how I hated him. You can imagine how pleased I was when, years later, I heard he was a fag."

Many of the artists had the same kind of idealistic belief in their work as the readers did in their heroes. Many

slaved for hours perfecting new techniques of foreshortening, overhead shots, and shadowing; some claimed to have influenced film directors in their camera work. Then comics were a new form and their creators considered themselves pioneers. But comic books were also quite openly, though with no camp pride, junk. "Junk," Feiffer explains, "is there to entertain on the basest, most compromised of levels. . . . Its values are the least middle-class of all the mass media." Some comics were published on a shoestring by fly-by-night companies that changed their names as often as they changed heroes. Tenement backrooms served as offices and the artists were underpaid.

On that level they flourished for years with considerable vitality and, within set formulas, with remarkable originality, creating a widely diverse pantheon of heroes and anti-heroes. The initial blow came in the fifties when they were first taken seriously and when psychiatrist Frederic Wertham almost tolled their death-knell in his book *Seduction of the Innocents*, which woefully chronicled their neurotic themes.

Wertham said of Batman: "Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realise the subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature Batman and his young friend Robin. It is like the wish dream of two homosexuals living together."

The public, adult, of course, was horrified, and the comics were cleaned up. But now the worm has turned again and the pulp fantasies face a more deadly challenge: camp acceptance by adults absolutely determined on being frivolous.

Now the books are bought for 10s a copy in the Porto-

bello Road. Now 30 million Americans, at least half of them adult, watch television Batman, and American merchants expect to sell over £200 million worth of Batman posters, sweatshirts, colouring books, and other Bat-exotica ranging up to £20 Bat-tuxedos and £40 Batman electric guitars. Now middle-aged executives chuckle over the latest Batman jokes at Park Avenue cocktail parties. (A recent one goes: "What do you call Batman and Robin after they are run over by a steam roller? Flatman and the Boy Wonder Ribbon.") Panel-lists discuss his meaning in glossy magazines, commenting on the analyses offered by other panellists in other magazines. Yes, Batman has become middle-class, not quite the middle-class that once denounced him, but the new middle-class that has the money and time to satisfy a ferocious appetite for leisure.

The TV show, now eight months old in America, owes more to present trends than to its source.

Batman has even lost his hard-muscled virility. First there were the costume dangers inherent in the translation from paper to TV. Bob Kane could, on the printed page, keep Batman's costume taut, as befitted one whose muscles were always tensed to fight crime. But on TV . . . "I'm afraid it's going to wrinkle," said Kane. "Why didn't they use latex?"

### THE CORNINES

Adam West, though apparently warned by the show's directors that he would be finished the first time he got cute, plays the hero with the self-conscious corniness of a novice comedian. Not that the scriptwriters help. The stories in the comic book were swept along by a never-lessening narrative tension; on television Batman has time for mouthing verbosity like "in the vernacular of the underworld . . ." before he makes his getaway, slower than the thwuck! of flowing molasses. And the transition points up all the hero's flaws. "All he does is poove around," said one disgruntled viewer of the show. "For Chrissake, he can't even fly." Said American TV critics: "The show is so bad, it's good. If it were any better, it would be terrible."

Nowhere is the difference between the comic and the television eras more apparent than in the high-pressure



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campaign to squeeze every last penny out of the fad before it dies its inevitable death. Mervyn Brodie, of Mervyn Brodie & Associates Ltd, describes his work as "character merchandising." His firm handles Batman product licences internationally (they also did James Bond) and is, in association with Walter Tuckwell & Associates Ltd, planning a massive merchandising campaign for Britain.

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## THE HUMOUR

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A small, dark South African who spends most of his time in Torremolinos, Brodie personally likes the show. "As a programme for children," he said, "it's absolutely superb, because they're not looking for sophistication. For an adult to enjoy this programme, he has to have a highly-developed sense of humour. With adults, I find the more intelligent they are, the more they enjoy it." But, of course, Brodie is not really concerned with qualitative analysis. "Really, all that concerns me is, do they want to see it? As long as they go to see it, I'll keep selling the stuff. And after Batman, there'll be Superman."

Brodie expects the British to spend about £10 million on Batman products, of which, he estimates, one million will be on chewing gum alone. But they will be able to choose from roller skates, plastic marble mazes, water pistols, chocolate biscuits, telescopes, painting-by-number sets, slippers, a nodding head money box, imitation jewellery, and battery-operated walking figures. "Kids don't really buy these things," Brodie admits. "In the main they're bought by adults for kids."

And the hard sell on Batman has hardly begun. This, Brodie is delaying to coincide with the release of a colour full-length feature film some time in the future. It will also never be as big a sell as it is already in America. "In America they're much more conscious of this sort of thing. The American population is much more prone to this sort of hysteria than the British. There's kinky stuff in America that won't catch on here." But despite these disadvantages Brodie is happy in his work. "Merchandising is fascinating to play with. The toy trade, through it, is undergoing a minor revolution. It's all junk but it's fun."



## The doll that leads the drive to make us all Batmaniacs

He's only 11 inches high, this Batman doll lying amid some of the Batmania we shall be seeing in Britain soon. But in spite of his size, he's already launching the gigantic super-sell here of the products that are already sweep-

ing America. Expected biggest single seller will be the Batman chewing-gum - with sales predicted at £1 million. Other fascinating items to make expected £10 million sales include: Batman walkie-talkie, mask specs, helmet, bis-

cuits, Robin Society badges, T-shirts, roller skates, plastic marble mazes, water pistols, telescopes, paint-by-numbers sets, nodding head money boxes, imitation jewellery and battery-operated walking figures.