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The Next Generation of Comics Scholarship:

Miller Misunderstood: Rethinking the Politics of "The Dark Knight"

Jessica Kowalik

When "The Dark Knight" film hit theaters in 2008, it generated a lot of conversation about its conservative undertones and its not unduly subtle allusions to the War on Terror. Alfred refers to the Joker as a terrorist; and Batman's plan to spy on all electronic devices to track him down, coupled with Lucius Fox's concerns about too much power in one man's hands (Nolan, 2008), is reminiscent of real-life implications of the PATRIOT Act. In light of a post-9/11 world, Batman's vigilante justice takes on a suddenly real-world tone. In one such example of popular reception, Andrew Klavan writes in *The Wall Street Journal*, "There seems to me no question that the Batman film...is at some level a paean of praise to...George W. Bush.... Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency..." (Klavan, 2008). This is, of course, a matter of opinion, but he raises a valid approach to analyzing the film. Klavan continues by asking why Hollywood conservatives must put on a mask to speak their mind. How do conservatively-inclined comic writers express their views?

I started my research asking, "Where is Batman post-9/11? How do his comics respond to the events of September 11?" There has been plenty of discourse on Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Spiderman's tribute to the victims of 9/11; but when I found no scholarly discussion on Batman comics in relation to 9/11, my question became, "Why is no one looking at Batman?" My first tangible result was Wandtke's essay "Frank Miller Strikes Again and Batman Becomes a Postmodern Anti-Hero: The Tragic (Comic) Reformulation of the Dark Knight," which introduced me to *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, Miller's first post-9/11 graphic novel and intended sequel to the epic *Dark Knight Returns*. Wandtke concludes that Miller is using Batman to satirize the Bush administration, adding in a footnote that the criticism Miller levels at the comic book industry through his work (making *DK2* so excessive as to mock recent superhero depictions) *should* be read as his criticism of the overall political situation in the country, with the industry serving as a substitute for the Bush administration (italics mine) (Wandtke, 2007:105-106). Yet Miller, who defined himself as a "liberal hawk," (George, 2003:115) in a 2003 interview, would, on the subject of the War on Terror, be in good company among many conservatives. I wish to complicate Wandtke's argument; yes, Miller has criticized Bush, more for his methods than his

actions; but as I will demonstrate, his target seems to be the American people and what he perceives as national denial about the War on Terror (George, 2003:115).

I was prepared to accept Wandtke's explanation for Miller's second, and even darker, Batman novel, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. Miller has been quoted in many sources, including Wandtke's essay, as using all of his new work as a response to September 11. I was of the personal opinion, from *The Dark Knight Returns*, easily interpreted as Miller's critique of what he saw as a weak, conservative government under Reagan, that Miller was a staunch liberal. I decided to check my assumptions against the words of Miller himself, and what I found shocked me. Miller has made some very conservative statements of late (neoconservative would be fitting given his pro-interventionist stance) openly supporting the War on Terror: "Mostly I hear people say, 'Why did we attack Iraq?'...we're taking on an idea. Nobody questions why after Pearl Harbor we attacked Nazi Germany...we were taking on a form of global fascism, we're doing the same thing right now." His criticism of Bush mainly relates to his preparing only the military, and not the country, for war (Conan with Miller, 2007). Miller can neither be classified as purely liberal nor conservative as I will explain later. Obviously, Miller's post-9/11 work has not been analyzed to its full potential.

First, let us ask how Batman relates to the subject of September 11. How are his enemies relevant to those we face today? Danny Fingerroth, who ran Marvel's Spider-Man line and currently teaches comics writing at New York University, makes the following claim: villains, or at least the idea they personify, may be said to never die in the sense that they represent such an idea, an evil, that cannot be destroyed (Fingerroth, 2004: 164). After all, why would we need Batman if there were no Joker, no Two-Face that, in one form or another, always resurfaces, necessitating Batman to don his cape once more? We have superheroes because we have supervillains (or the reverse could be a valid argument), and we have both because of their realworld counterparts, particularly because of real evil. If there were no corruption (real or perceived) in government, we probably would not care to see Superman and Batman battle each other on this premise in *The Dark Knight Returns*. Their epic struggle would be reduced to any other testosterone-fueled brawl, instead of a battle for the ideals each typifies. Fingerroth insists that the supervillain is usually far more obsessed with his/her ideal or goal than the superhero is, Batman being the notable exception, never content waiting for something to go wrong before he fixes it (Fingerroth, 2004:165-166), rather like the neoconservatives who promote an aggressive foreign policy.

That obsessed goal may be the classic world domination; or it may be something far more pertinent to current times, like the threat to American ideals. As Alfred describes the Joker in "The Dark Knight" (2008) film, "Some men just want to watch the world burn." If the film is indeed a conservative

commentary on September 11, the Joker is, as Alfred puts it, a terrorist. Gotham becomes New York, and Batman is an allusion to the renegade neo-conservative (here Republican) government determined to end the terror before it destroys the city (or country) he/it has sworn to protect. Miller's Gotham is essentially New York City, or at least the metaphoric underbelly of any city; *DKR* even references its very own twin towers in the opening pages (Miller, 1986:11) while the Statue of Liberty is featured in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (Miller, 2002:68).

I turn to Miller's first Batman graphic novel, the 1986 *Dark Knight Returns*. Firstly, picking up the argument that Miller has conservative tendencies would explain his revision of Robin's gender in *The Dark Knight Returns*, from male to female, trying, as Tipton argues, to dispel rumors of a homosexual relationship between Batman and his sidekick (Tipton, 2008:322). If Miller were a pure liberal, he would readily maintain the male-male relationship and let the critics make of it what they would. The question might be asked, though, was not homosexuality less accepted in the 1980s?

Jeni Loftus of the *American Sociological Review* extensively researched American attitudes towards homosexuality from 1973-1998, concluding that our overall attitude was slightly more liberal (therefore positively viewing homosexuality) from 1973 to 1976, when our values became increasingly conservative (negative towards homosexuality) until 1990, at which time, a liberal trend started again (Loftus, 2001: 762-782). In fact, the most conservative year on the question of the very morality of homosexuality was 1987 (Loftus, 2001: 767), one year after *The Dark Knight Returns* hit the presses. Might not that explain Miller's reluctance to leave Robin male, even if he were liberal? My response would be that Miller is certainly not opposed to offending anyone. If he had wanted Batman to go gay, although that might have sparked conflict with DC publishers, Miller would have probably found a way. DC has historically let Miller exercise creative license, in any case. Tipton refers to Miller's decision to alter Robin's gender as "at once reasonable, but also troublesome," going on to quote Miller's introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns* in which Miller refers to his vision of Robin as a "she." While Tipton quickly assures readers he is not implying that Miller is "in any way homophobic or homosexually panicked," he insists Miller must have been "troubled" over Robin's gender (Tipton, 2008:323-324). Most, especially conservatively-inclined, writers in the 1980s would have indeed been disturbed by their characters' being interpreted as subliminally homoerotic -- thanks to Wertham's indelible *Seduction of the Innocent* (Fingeroth, 2004:22-23). When Dick Grayson, former Boy Wonder, Robin, reappears in *DK2* dressed as the Joker, (Miller, 2002:240-241), he is not depicted as homosexual in either dress or behavior, confirming that even when Robin turns criminal, he never was, or will be, gay.

Miller did manage to make the real Joker gay, which has equal, if not

greater, significance. Tipton vigorously asserts that "of all the villains that Bruce/Batman faces, The Joker is perhaps the most sexually troublesome, so much so that his character in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* was openly queer" (Tipton, 2008:335), a choice on Miller's part that makes the Joker's gay quality as prominent and perhaps disturbing to Batman as his criminal activities. Tipton misses an opportunity to analyze a faction of the criminal ring, referred to as the mutants, in *DKR*. One such character is at first difficult to categorize: Batman refers to it as a "she" but the name given is "Bruno." A store clerk antagonizes this character by mentioning his/her "boyfriend," implied to be the Joker. The physical appearance suggests transgender: the bust and buttocks of a woman, tattooed with Neo-Nazi swastikas, but with the jaw and haircut of a man (Miller, 1986:106-108) (See



Fig. 1. Note the blurred feminine and masculine characteristics of the central mutant figure, as well as the reference by the clerk in the lower left to his/her "boyfriend" (Miller, 1986:106).

Fig. 1). The facial features and lipstick are reminiscent of those of the Joker, who applies his own makeup and dons purple heels before a television appearance, following his release from Arkham Asylum (Miller, 1986:121 and 125) (See Fig. 2). By making so many of Batman's enemies gay or transgender, it stands to reason that *gay* is one of Batman's enemies. The translation is that Batman stands for traditional/conservative values.

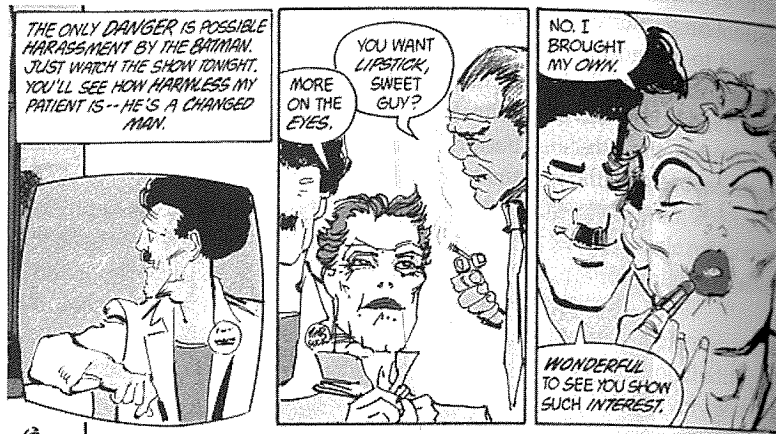


Fig. 2. The Joker's therapist helps him primp before a television appearance (Miller, 1986:121).

Also, in the first book of *The Dark Knight Returns*, an ordinary citizen praises Batman as “kicking just the right butts -- butts the cops ain't kicking...Hope he goes after the homos next”(Miller, 1986:45). Here, homosexuals are put in the same category as criminals who need to be cleaned off the streets. The counter-argument might be made that Miller is making fun of the responses to superheroes by the public, particularly those of a conservative persuasion who support Batman -- a renegade standing up for old-fashioned, or even out-dated to a liberal mindset, values. I would rebut that claim by pointing out the panel following the one just mentioned, in which another citizen touts the (presumably liberal) need to treat criminals with rehabilitation (Miller, 1986:45) (See Fig. 3). At first glance, it appears Miller presents two diverging viewpoints in equal measure; but on closer inspection, the second man is interrupted midstream before he can indulge in an extended lecture. It may be mildly significant that the conservative commentary is presented first and allowed to finish.

Wandtke, who largely prompted my inquiry into the politics of the Dark Knight and Miller, in his preface comments that the *DKR* convinced him that “Superman was a stooge of an ineffectual and simple-minded American government,” which he admits is a Marxist reading of the superhero representation (Wandtke, 2007:3). Aeon J. Skoble, associate professor of

BATMAN? YEAH, I THINK HE'S A-OKAY. HE'S KICKING JUST THE RIGHT BUTTS-- BUTTS THE COPS AIN'T KICKING, THAT'S FOR SURE. HOPE HE GOES AFTER THE HOMOS NEXT.

MAKES ME SICK. WE MUST TREAT THE SOCIALLY MIS-ORIENTED WITH REHABILITATIVE METHODS. WE MUST PATIENTLY REALIGN THEIR-- EXCUSE ME--? NO, I'D NEVER LIVE IN THE CITY...

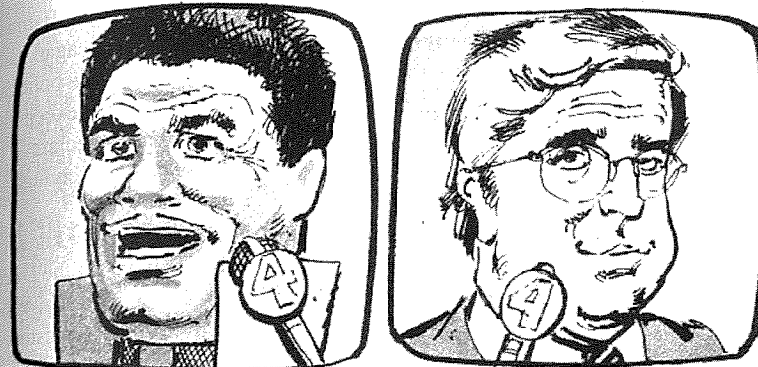


Fig. 3. A conservative then a liberal commentary are broadcast in Gotham (Miller, 2002:45).

philosophy at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, mentions an intriguing shared attribute of *The Dark Knight Returns* and its contemporary *Watchmen*: “in both stories, public sentiment has turned against the superheroes, and their activities are explicitly criminalized, unless they officially work for the government...a criminal has more to fear from Rorschach or Batman than from Doctor Manhattan or Superman, although political enemies of the United States would need to be more fearful of the latter” (Morris and Morris, 2006: 40-41 and 271). Still, by Superman's allowing Batman to keep the facade of his faked death in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986:136-139), he is tacitly supporting Batman's unsanctioned war on crime. Reagan (the President, never explicitly called Reagan) laments that if things were different he would have given the Batman a medal (Miller, 1986:84). Superman seems to almost regret that he must stop his vigilante counterpart who can do what the government and even the President cannot -- the price of being in the public eye and held eternally accountable. Through the *DKR*, Miller expresses frustration with what he deems to be Reagan's less-than-aggressive handling of the Cold War. From a liberal hawk perspective, Reagan should perhaps have been less conservative in this sense, relying less on deterrence. In *DKR*, when the Soviets release a nuclear bomb, the President sends Superman to deflect it, rather than declaring war and striking back:

[presidential advisor:] Mr. President -- we'll look like *wimps* if we don't --

[Reagan:] -- Let's see what our own little deterrent [Superman] can do....
[Batman:] Clark, you idiot. You let them do it.... Since my own atoms aren't bouncing around the stratosphere [as they would have if the Americans had launched a nuke] -- I'll assume Russia has taken the lead in the arms race. I keep track of these things, Clark. One of us has to (Miller, 1986:165-168).

He does not explicitly denigrate Reagan; rather, he is promoting Batman as the hawkish force, taking up the fight directly, as he wishes Reagan had. Batman calls Superman a joke by the end of the novel, and himself a political liability (Miller, 1986:134), the kind Gotham needs but no one else, excepting perhaps Gordon and Robin, has the guts to be. One commentator declares, "It is a war -- though he [Batman] seems to be the only one with balls enough to fight it" (Miller, 1986:144).

There is a plethora of characters who must not do what they know in their hearts is right, because it is not socially acceptable, or legal. In the *DKR*, Gordon cannot do "the obvious thing" and kill the mutant leader when as he has just shot the mayor. Lola, a prominently-featured journalist, is chastened to be careful what she says on television, even as a representative of the very institution of free speech in America (Miller, 1986:91 and 165). Like the President, they cannot do or say openly what they really believe; those who, like Gordon, more frankly support Batman's brand of vigilante justice, albeit the only way to catch a killer in the novel, are ridiculed if not vilified. The *Sons of Batman*, self-prescribed copycats whom the Batman eventually trains following his faked death at the end of *DKR*, are read, tellingly, as S.O.B.s (Miller, 1986:161-162). They are read, literally, as an acronym for Sons of Batman, and figuratively as reprobates (SOBs, which of course stands for sons of bitches), as villains for their actions. Like the Batman of "The Dark Knight" (2008) film, they will be hunted, chased like dogs, for doing the necessary, in their minds the right, but the illegal, thing. The *DKR* was a response to the Reagan era, promoting a more aggressive foreign policy as Miller would fiercely advocate after September 11.

In a 2002 National Public Radio interview, Miller confirms that at least for the foreseeable future, his work will be a direct or metaphoric response to 9/11. He concludes his interview by assuring listeners that his next work, which was then *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, would directly address, in "pulp terms," terrorism and what for him amounts to World War III (Bogave with Miller, 2002). Clearly, *DK2* has been left out of the discussion on comic artist's responses to 9/11.

One of my main concerns is addressing Miller's self-described sequel to *The Dark Knight Returns*, the 2002 *Dark Knight Strikes Again*, in light of my revelations on Miller's political motivations. Miller had completed volumes 1 and 2 of the graphic novel prior to 9/11 and was midstream in volume 3 during

the attacks. DC Comics gave Miller a time extension and asked if he would be interested in changing (or willing to change) anything in wake of recent events. Miller took the extra time afforded him to rework the third volume but refused to change anything DC had suggested. Once again, Miller was left to his own devices, which meant he was not about to pull his (or Batman's) punches. There was speculation that DC deliberately delayed publication to avoid offending anyone with the novel's content (Wandtke, 2007:104 and 110). Miller defiantly quipped that he was trying to offend everybody in every way possible with *DK2* (George, 2003:109).

It seems to me that Miller is not concerned with satirizing Bush; rather, I find his work to be a commentary on society's mentality post-9/11, which naturally comes back to politics. When asked by *The Comics Journal* in an early 2003 interview about his latest work, *DK2*, Miller insisted that he did not envision the book to be a satire (George, 2003:107). He did, however, suggest that "[I] wanted to push things further, partly because I could." When asked if President Bush inspired a lot of the political content of the book, Miller responded that he had already started on *DK2* before the new President was elected, adding that "both candidates [Bush and Gore] came across to me like computer-generated images.... so I came up with a generic President who was named after the President of a truly horrific old DC comic called *Prez*" (George, 2003:108-109). He is not criticizing Bush, nor using him as a prototype for the President of *DK2*; his net is cast much wider, on us.

Miller, who had then recently relocated to New York, declared that after 9/11, he wanted to "play around with doing some propagandizing," adding that Batman is portrayed in *DK2* as at once a terrorist and a hero. His only concern with our liking him is that we do not. Miller's Batman in *DK2* "is a hero, but heroes don't have to be likable" (George, 2003:110), so long as they get the job done. "We've had this horrible thing happen, and we've got to retaliate and we need retribution and we need to solve a global problem. We're in World War III.... I think there is still a national denial about it, where we have a pathetic peace movement that is trying to argue against Vietnam or something.... I think that the President has done a very, very bad job of explaining things, but the more I research it, the more the war with Iraq makes sense -- which I didn't think at first...so I guess I define my position as being a liberal hawk" (George, 2003:115). Neoconservative might also fit the description nicely.

How do we define neoconservatism? Simply put, it is liberalism hijacking the conservative train. Neocons adhere to the belief that it is the responsibility of the United States to propagate/export our concept of individual liberty and that the government is responsible for protecting us from external threats to our way of life. The idea of American intervention took strong hold on the populace after 9/11: "What was previously deemed too risky became acceptable..." (Selden, 2004:no pagination). The ideas forwarded by neocons are neither neo (new) nor conservative. The term first applied to "former leftists

who became anti-communist after World War II and to Democrats who found themselves more in the Republican camp in the post-Vietnam era.... More often than not, the label is now employed as a pejorative to mean ‘hawkish on foreign policy’.... Although the so-called neocons may in general be Republicans, their ideas have a fair degree of approval within the ranks of the Democratic party as well...it is more a contest between realists and idealists -- with the neocons firmly in the idealist camp. Realists are generally conservative in the true sense of the word. They do not seek to take risks to extend liberal democratic ideals...[which] contrasts sharply with the neoconservative camp...it is their belief that this [intervention] will make the United States more secure by...getting at some of the root causes of terrorism.” This is a philosophy deeply embedded in the history of American political theory (Seldon, 2004).

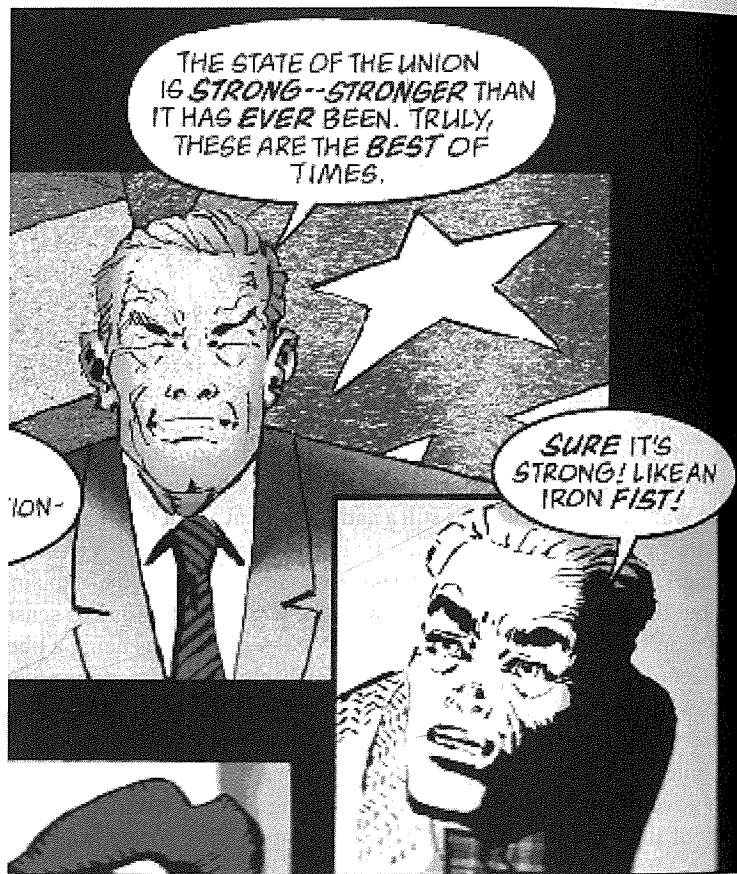


Fig. 4. An irate reporter responds to the President's address with despair and disbelief in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (Miller, 2002:15).

In an appropriately named 2000 *New York Times* article, “When Left Turns Right, It Leaves the Middle Muddled,” Tanenhaus summarizes that neocons may be defined as liberals who were “mugged by reality” (by World War II-era communism, Vietnam, and now the War on Terror) and “drifted steadily rightward” (Tanenhaus, 2000), much as Miller revised his opinions about the war in Iraq after doing his own research. Looking back at his work, taking into consideration everything from Robin's sudden gender change to his stance on the War on Terror, Miller has himself consistently drifted in the direction of the political right. While Miller may disagree with the way in which Bush prepared and persuaded the nation for war, they would find common ground in the neoconservative approach to foreign policy in the days since the attacks.



Fig. 5. (Miller, 2002:16).

Through *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, Miller makes a hearty mockery of those, most explicitly the media, who satirize Bush, his administration, and the war: “[The state of the union is] strong! Like an iron fist!” one disgruntled reporter quibbles (See Fig. 4). With crazed eyes, the same reporter claims that the country is only at peace because “We’ve killed just about everybody who disagrees with us!” (Miller, 2002:15-16) (See Fig. 5). The National Security Enforcement Director's name is read Bill Prick; the translation being that people regard him as a scoundrel, much as the Sons of Batman (SOBs) could be interpreted as dirtbags. In a parody of the mockery many have made of the Iraq War, there are reports of an asteroid being nuked even though it posed “no conceivable threat to planet earth” (Miller, 2002:34 and 40). Miller admitted

to the often outrightly silly tone of *DK2*, looking back to World War II-era Batman films which openly stereotyped the Japanese: "... there was just something so idiotic and wonderful about it that I wanted to capture some of that" (George, 2003:108).

Miller forces us, or at least those of us who refuse to support the war or take it seriously, to look in a mirror, hoping to cast such an absurd reflection we have to think twice about where we stand. I think his use of parody to mock satire of the war is creative genius; if I had never learned of his true political ideology, I would never have understood *DK2* to be anything more than mockery of a war under a conservative administration. Now I see that the joke has been on us. He is trying to illustrate how deeply he feels we have been in denial since 9/11: "[Hawkboy after attacks on innocent civilians:] I do not accept these deaths. I do not accept this crime. [Batman:] You're going to get what I never got. Retribution" (Miller, 2002:161), the retribution Miller argues we need. Breaking his one and only rule, Batman even kills former Robin, Dick Grayson, when he returns as the Joker reincarnate (Miller, 2002:243-244); times have indeed changed. Speaking through Batman, Miller's message is clear: "You can't free a planet from tyranny and keep everybody happy the whole time" (Miller, 2002:145).

Miller's most recent, and probably most controversial, work is yet to be released: *Holy Terror, Batman!* At WorldCon 2006, Miller divulged details from his next Batman novel: Al Qaeda attacks Gotham, for which Batman "kicks Al Qaeda's ass" (Goldstein, 2006). Miller will write, illustrate, and ink his new brainchild, which comes from his gut reaction to current events, lamenting that entertainers need to stand up to terrorism like 1940s' artists stood up to Hitler. Miller seeks to address the American people as directly as possible, to remind them of what they are up against. Channelling 1940s' bravado, Miller exhorts, "Superman punched out Hitler. So did Captain America. That's one of the things they're there for... It just seems silly to chase around the Riddler when you've got Al Qaeda out there" (Goldstein, 2006). The message seems clear: "Be afraid" (Goldstein, 2006), of the raw, emotional visuals awaiting us, but do not be afraid of standing up to the terrorists. In the forceful, aggressive fashion of a neocon, or a self-described liberal hawk, Miller wants us to follow in Batman's footsteps and confront the threat to American security head-on.

Why has *DK2* been mostly left out, and for that matter Miller, of discussions on post-9/11 comics? Does no one really know what to make of Miller? Since *DK2* received such mixed reviews, there seems even greater reason to me that we should be analyzing and discussing it. What makes Miller unique is his steadfast focus on the events of September 11,¹ unlike most mainstream comic artists who produced a tribute or a miniseries for the attacks, then retreated to other story lines.

Endnotes

¹ For a brief, personal summary of Miller's post-9/11 philosophy, see NPR's "Morning Edition: This I Believe," from Sept. 11, 2006, a collection of personal statements commemorating the 9/11 attacks. Miller's essay, called "That Old Piece of Cloth," is available at <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5784518>>.

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The Ephemeral Nature of Everything: A Conversation with Art Spiegelman

Andy Smith

The following is a complete transcript of a one-on-one interview I conducted with Art Spiegelman on April 15, 2005, in his New York City studio. Spiegelman was scheduled to speak at Lafayette College that August 2005 about his book *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), as part of the Lafayette Class of 2009 orientation program. The college chose *In the Shadow of No Towers* as the shared text for the new class of incoming students, and Spiegelman agreed to sit for an interview for a documentary film project I was producing as a companion project to his book. Excerpts from the video shoot became an integral part of the feature-length documentary, "Towers of Shadow and Light." During a conversation centered around *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman discusses a variety of relevant issues, including patriotism, memory, politics, the influence of mass media, the history of comics, reading, visual culture, and ephemera. We began our conversation when Spiegelman noticed my worn copy of *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

Art Spiegelman: I love this; this is a totally whacked copy [of the book]. Pantheon didn't want me to use these kinds of mattes and varnishes on the cover because they said it's going to get dinged. And I thought this was a good thing -- you know, the buildings get dinged, it's all about the ephemeral nature of everything we're living through and how everything passes and gets damaged by time. Good! So anyway, I kind of like it. I know that Pantheon still mutters because they get copies back from bookstores because of these incredibly fragile surfaces.

Andy Smith: My students were talking one day about the fact that it reminded them of children's books, especially the heavy cardboard ones that you can't tear apart even if you want to.

Spiegelman: That's what they say, but having had two-year-olds, they don't last all that long, those board books. The funniest exchange I heard about that was that two people were overheard walking into the bookstore in Grand Central where there was a really amazing display that got protested for the book, and the woman says, "Why did they make this as a children's board book?" And the guy says, "He was hoping the president [George W. Bush] would read it."

Smith: So we have 500 or so incoming students at Lafayette and we've made your book their orientation centerpiece, the summer reading assignment. How do you feel about that?

Spiegelman: I'm very impressed. In a way, I could be jaded because *Maus*