

Boy and Girl Wonders: Robin in Cultural Context

Second edition

By Mary Borsellino

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Foreword to the second edition

Any kind of examination of an ongoing cultural phenomenon is going to be incomplete. That's just obvious. Studying something while it's still in progress is never going to result in a definitive tome, and thank goodness for that. It's my opinion that analysis should do its best to be a useful and thoughtful contribution to a dialog. And, so long as the conversation keeps going on, the things said earlier in that conversation are going to become less relevant.

If I tried to keep *Boy and Girl Wonders* up-to-date with every shift and change in Robin's world, I'd go crazy. The first version of this book came out in March 2009, and as I write this it's November 2009. Just in those few months, the Batman comics have seen the following developments:

Bruce Wayne has died, and Dick Grayson – the first Robin – has taken his place as Batman. Jason Todd, the second Robin, has become one of those continuity-crossing figures whose backstory now embraces every variation, contradiction, origin and death that's been given to him along the way. He's also taken on a facially scarred teenage girl as his sidekick, and the two of them patrol Gotham City as the Red Hood and Scarlet. Tim Drake, the third Robin, has taken up a slightly more adult variant of the role, previously used by Dick and Jason, and is now the title character of the comic *Red Robin*.

Stephanie Brown, whose death prompted my creation of Girl-Wonder.org and a campaign to have her Robin costume memorialized in the same way Jason's had been, is not only alive once again but now stars in her own ongoing title as the latest young crimefighter to take up the role of Batgirl. Dan DiDio's regular editorial column in the back of all DC Comics titles had the following to say on that decision:

Now me and Stephanie, we go way back. As a fan I followed her story in ROBIN comics, and when I first got here at DC, agreeing to her "death" was one of my first "controversial" decisions. After all, I was the one who suggested making her a Robin before killing her, so her death would seem to have more meaning. Heh. Who knew?

From the time of her death, to the outcry for a memorial, and ultimately, to her return, there is no denying that her character had connected with a portion of our fanbase and, more important, connected to the Bat-family. It just seemed to make sense that she was the one, and given her history and ties to all the members of Batman's

world, the potential is there to make this new Batgirl the one fans will be speaking about for a very long time.

My decision to study, and write about, the cultural context of Robin has ended up changing that very context: now, because of Girl-Wonder.org, both Robin and Batgirl now have new cultural connotations, ones related to fan activism and feminism. The characters are now going in directions they may never have gone, because of how strongly I felt that Robin's potential meanings were being squandered by the editorial regime at DC Comics at the time I began writing in 2005.

Oh, and as well as all those other developments in comics since the first edition of this book, we also have a new Robin: Damian Wayne, the precocious, haughty young son of Bruce Wayne and the femme fatale Talia Al Ghul.

But I'm sure that all those statuses quo will change and shift again as soon as this second edition is done with. Ongoing stories never stay static long enough to properly define; it's one of their great virtues.

When the first edition of this book came out, I appeared on Melbourne's queer radio station, JOY 94.9, on the pop culture program The Outland Institute, to talk Robin. The episode can be listened to via my website, maryborsellino.com.

Even more excitingly, Professor Henry Jenkins – in many ways, father of modern cultural studies – interviewed me about the project for his academia/fan blog. That's the real reason for this new edition: Professor Jenkins has allowed me to reproduce our discussion in full, and it now appears at the end of this book.

Just as the comics themselves have gone through shifts and changes, so too have new examples of Robin in wider pop culture constantly appeared before me. It's been more than half a year since I thought I was done once and for all with this study, but my brain hasn't yet caught on to that fact.

How does the mosaic that is Robin's meanings change shape when we include, for instance, the reality television show *American Idol*'s eighth season? Adam Lambert, the consistently over-the-top, theatrical, larger-than-life glam rock performer who came second in the competition, was asked "Batman or Superman?" on the social networking site Twitter. His response was:

Batman fo sho. Him and Robin are real hot together.
haha.

As well as being a highly visible pop figure in contemporary music, Lambert is openly gay, and so his response reinforces Batman and Robin's relevancy in the cultural conversation of pop, glam, and camp. But as well as reinforcing, Lambert complicates and adds to Batman and Robin's meanings: in one video appearance, he explains to the eighth season winner Kris Allen that Kris, due to his smaller stature, is the Robin of the pair, rather than the 'Batman' which his winning status might otherwise suggest.

Allen is straight, married to his teenage sweetheart, but both him and Lambert have spoken many times in the media about the deep friendship and respect they share, and often engage in lighthearted, flirtatious banter. This ease within complexly coded cultural dynamics echoes the examples of My Chemical Romance and Fall Out Boy, which I outline in the main text of this study, but Allen and Lambert's popularity is more

mainstream and occurred within a traditionally culturally conservative text – *American Idol* – and so the resultant complexities reflected back onto Robin are differently charged.

My Chemical Romance haven't stopped contributing to Robin's meaning since I first published this book, either. Singer Gerard Way and his younger brother, bassist Mikey Way, presented a panel at the 2009 ComicCon which included the following exchange:

Mikey: "I'm the Robin to his Batman."

Gerard: "And it's kind of weird because I used to like Robin way more than Batman."

Mikey: "You used to have the Robin pajamas!"

Gerard: "Yeah, I had the Robin pajamas and Mikey had Batman and so it looked kinda weird...y'know? And mine were kinda tight too."

Not to mention the fact that the first glimpse the world was given of Gerard's daughter, Bandit Lee Way, featured the baby dressed up in a Batman costume, Way's dog in a Joker costume, and Bandit's mother, the punk musician Lyn Z, dressed in full Robin garb.

I could go on and on – it's seemed, at times, like there are new Robin examples every way I turn since I completed this project. Which is just proof of the point I was making in the first place – Robin is a figure with a huge amount of potential meaning in modern pop culture.

But my book must come to its finish, even if it seems like my observations are in no hurry to do the same. So here is *Boy and Girl Wonders: Robin in Cultural Context*, in its second edition. I hope it starts conversations.

Mary Borsellino

November 2009

Boy and Girl Wonders: Robin in Cultural Context

Robin didn't start with Robin. Robin won't end when Robin ends. In fact, it's arguable that Robin's already begun to move on from Robin.

In less smartypants language, what I mean is that the ingredients which were brought together to create the character of "Robin", Batman's red-and-green-and-gold-wearing sidekick, were ingredients which already shared numerous common elements. And once Robin could no longer embody these elements, other pop culture rose to take over the character's place.

"Robin", for the sake of this discussion, refers to one or all of a group of characters: Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Timothy Drake, Caroline Kelley and Stephanie Brown, each of whom has played the role at Batman's side at some point during the character's history. Sometimes films and television shows have included Robin -- usually Dick -- but there has not, to date, been any Robin who has appeared exclusively in these media and not in the comics as well. As I write this, it seems increasingly likely that Bruce Wayne's young son Damian will take over the Robin role sometime soon in the comics, with the introduction of the new title *Batman and Robin*. Rather than hold off and see how that transpires, however, I've decided that this is as good a time as any to document the cultural history of Robin's meanings; the *Robin* comic book recently drew to a close after a run of over 180 issues, the two Robins who were killed in battle have both returned to life, and so it seems like there's no time like the present to detail the intertextual story so far.

The way Batman fans often dismiss the importance of Robin and shove the character off to the margin is, ironically, one of the things which has helped the character survive: being marginalized has meant that the character holds special appeal for those readers and viewers who are themselves marginalized, such as queer fans and women. Their investment in Robin, and refusal to relinquish the feelings of connection and ownership they feel towards the character, have shaped the way Robin has grown and changed. When Robin's official corporate owners declare that Robin is not gay, guerrilla art springs up in galleries depicting the character in a homosexual romance with Batman. When female characters in the Robin role are killed off or disregarded by endorsed continuity, feminist activism websites organize write-in protests to Robin's copyright holders.

This sort of response has meant that Robin's 'life' outside of officially-endorsed texts has been a vital and enduring element of the character, which in turn has meant that Robin's central core endures almost intact even when it's forced to find a new home away from Robin. Imagine, if you like, a Robin-shaped figure made of soft clay: the tighter DC Comics and Time Warner -- keepers of the Robin trademark -- squeeze their grasp on the figure, the more clay seeps out between their fingers. The "Robin" ends up a mangled, unrecognizable mess, while the squeezed-away clay makes new shapes: Homer Simpson, SpongeBob Squarepants, rappers and rock stars and serial killers populating post-Robin pop culture.

But these inheritors of Robin's legacy would have nothing to inherit if the Robin figure itself hadn't first been shaped out of older storytelling and folk-character traditions, and so it's these precursors to Robin which we'll look at first.

Part One: Where Robin came from

'Trans' is Latin for 'across', and prefixes many words which can be applied to Robin:

- Robin is *transitory*, especially when depicted as an acrobat swinging between high-rise buildings.
- Robin is *transgressive*, a vigilante outlaw outside social rules.
- Robin is an adolescent on the cusp of adulthood; a very *transitional* age.
- Robin is sometimes required to cross-dress while fighting crime, placing the character in the role of *transvestite*.

- Ongoing debate about Robin's gender identifications make it worthwhile to add *transgender* to the list, as well.

The idea that Robin is a figure in the process of shifting from one state to another, a character in a state of flux, may be the foundation for much of the dismissal the character faces from writers, fans, and commentators. As we'll see time and time again in different examples later, being unable to define a character by fixed absolutes makes many people uneasy.

But Batman, as well as Robin, can be described in these shifting terms. As the writer Neil Gaiman phrased it in the DC Comics book *Batman: Cover to Cover*:

"If there is a joy to the concept of Batman, it's that he isn't one thing, that he contains all the Batmans that have walked the streets of Gotham City in the last sixty-five years [...] none of them are more valid, more true than any other."

Yet while this multiple-meaning situation may also be true of Batman, it seems to be especially true of Robin. Robin means so many different things to different people, all at once, as demonstrated by this selection of quotes:

Christian Bale, Batman actor, in the Chicago Sun-Times: "You really don't need him because Robin makes everything campy and not dark."

Frank Miller, comics writer, in the book *The Many Lives of the Batman*: "I always thought that Robin was a real pain-in-the-ass, but now I realize what a brilliant creation it was, because it really does give a human context to Batman's character."

Andy Medhurst, academic, also in *Many Lives*: "If one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin."

Fredric Wertham, psychiatrist, in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*: "Robin in a handsome ephebic boy, usually shown in his uniform with bare legs. He is buoyant with energy and devoted to nothing on earth or in interplanetary space as much as to Bruce Wayne. He often stands with his legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident."

Terry Moore, comics writer, online: "Let me just say this, Batman is no more gay than Wonder Woman is into bondage or the Flash is into red latex. Batman did not have inappropriate dealings with any of the seemingly endless stream of little fellas he kept around like a Bangkok colonialist and that should settle the matter."

If it is most useful to view Batman, as Gaiman suggests, as a mosaic - or, as *Many Lives* describes it, as a "distributed curve of meaning with a tendency toward some cultural mean", then the above quotes offer a cross-section of how this method might present Robin.

In the first three quotes Robin is a modifier: making things campy, making Batman something other than a real man, giving Batman a human context. The fourth and fifth quotes show the difficulty in finding an inherent meaning at the heart of Robin: Wertham's determination to illustrate his opinion of the character is counterpointed by Moore's tongue-in-cheek declarations, which teach the reader that there's no 'real' meaning to be uncovered, only interpretations, which is a statement echoing Gaiman's more straightforward remark.

It's possible to argue that Robin means, if the character consistently means any one thing, disruption. Robin shifts and changes elements of the surrounding world, and is always in motion as a concept itself.

This may be one explanation as to why the image of suspension occurs so often with Robin. Robin is constantly depicted on posters, comic-book and DVD covers, and comics panels, in the moment of swinging from one unseen foothold to another, caught mid-air. DC Comics' prestige *Archives* series, designed to capture and preserve the traditionally disposable comics format, chooses as cover images for its *Robin* and *World's Finest* volumes pictures of Robin in poses of this sort.

Suspension as a concept, as well as an image, recurs time and time again in the different elements of Robin. Writing about the figure of the aerialist - which has been a part of Robin since Robin's beginning - historian Helen Stoddart explains that suspension:

"Removes the figure involved from any temporal continuum in which it leaps or at least detaches itself from a past. However, like the moment of danger, since it does not have within it any immanent connection to a specific future, the stunt points only to inherent possibility rather than future progress; a possibility which may either be lost or realized."

The uneasiness with which mainstream audiences view "inherent possibility" is demonstrated in a number of Robin's other aspects. The potential adulthood and potential death simultaneously present in the figure of the youthful soldier, in particular, is repeated numerous times in Robin's history.

Germain Greer, writing about the adolescent boy in art, suggests that

"Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself a danger and emanates that danger to others."

Here the idea of suspension and the *trans* prefix start to overlap. Annamarie Jagose, an academic examining queer theory, offers that queerness "marks a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural" and is "always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate."

Androgyny, another recurring theme in the story of Robin, also ties the character to these ideas of suspension and transness. As explained by the book *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom* by Michael DeAngelis, "whether it is accurate to deem [a] sexually ambiguous identity 'androgynous' is, however, a perplexing matter, giving the inherent problematic of stabilizing a state of 'inbetweenness' that deliberately defies categorization."

As comics have attempted to reinvent themselves for new eras, so too has Robin been put through attempted redefinitions, with results of varying success. This increasingly narrow official world provided by DC Comics has meant that the eternally in-motion, in-between Robin has often been constrained. This has resulted in elements of the character emerging in other places, such as unofficial art and writing for both parody and reappropriation, and other characters being created which fill the voids left in what Robin used to be.

The fact that Robin is built out of longstanding folk myths may be a key reason why guerilla creators feel comfortable

appropriating the character. Cultural theorist John Fiske articulated the relationship between some fans and stories in this way:

"The reverence, even adoration, fans feel for their object of fandom sits surprisingly easily with the contradictory feeling that they also 'possess' that object, it is *their* popular cultural capital."

Specific examples of fans demanding possession of Robin will be detailed later. It's important, however, to first look at where this spirit of rebellion and disruption originated as a part of Robin. Two of the folk myths with strong connections to Robin are Robin Hood and Robin Goodfellow, both of which are tied to the feast of Carnival. Carnival, in the words of theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, was

"The suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed."

In short, the power and threat of Robin is that Robin refuses to be pinned down and made to be one static thing. Robin is a character who embodies the possibility of change and the potential to break the status quo.

One place to begin tracing the pre-history of Robin's origins is the 1980s, when the internal worlds of DC Comics' stories underwent significant shifts and a growing self-referentiality - what might be called an increasingly post-modern attitude - meant that the comics could include allusions to the stories which had played a part in forming Robin.

The 1980s was also a time when the more problematic elements of earlier storylines began to be removed as much as possible, which makes it difficult to trust the allusions to past works as completely truthful: the revision of histories is so widespread within comics these days that the term 'retcon' has been created to describe it.

'Retcon' is a contraction of 'retroactive continuity', and requires the reader to engage in a double-think in which they appreciate new twists on old stories while at the same time accepting that this is the new truth as to how things have always been.

Retconning allows anything no longer wanted to have never been at all. As Will Brooker, who completed his doctoral thesis on Batman, puts it, "the embarrassing moments of the 1950s and 1960s could simply be wiped out of history. There was to be no Rainbow Batman [...], no Robin shouting 'Come here, big boy!' to a pink alien."

This means that the nods to the past which began in the 1980s are subject to the selective memory made possible by retconning and are so not entirely reliable as guides to history. Still, their references to what has come before are a solid starting place from which to begin tracing Robin's beginning.

Little Nemo in Slumberland, later called *In the Land of Wonderful Dreams*, was first published in 1905. The comic's creator, Winsor McCay, shared with many other early cartoonists a background in vaudeville, but would later chide creators of the Superman cartoons for treating animation as a trade, not an art. The Nemo stories dealt with the nightly adventures of the title character, a small child.

In the book *Give Our Regards To The Atom-Smashers!*, the author

and media commentator Lydia Millet describes Nemo's place in the history of young comics protagonists in these terms:

"The thing about Nemo is, he's the polar opposite of the comic book heroes that succeeded him in popular culture. Living in a world of observation, not action, he's carried along the river of his dreams without propelling himself. His adventures are almost plotless, a series of static tableaux instead of stories, exquisite art-nouveau renderings of landscapes and palaces in which Nemo finds himself first and foremost an observer."

Because of the non-narrative nature of McCay's work, and his dismissal of superhero stories as degrading for a medium capable of high art, there will always be tensions within the influence that the Nemo comic has on the character of Robin. Robin is an active hero, rather than a passive observer; Robin's role in Slumberland-style stories is, at the outset, a response to the original text as much as it is a reference. Robin fights a monster encountered while sleeping, rather than simply vocalising fear at the sight. Robin attempts to educate and trade with the dream-people.

The cyclical nature of both comics underpins the fundamental similarities between them, despite these differences. The majority of the Robin dream-adventures took place in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, when the status quo was what Umberto Eco termed the "temporal paradox": the present is continuous and eternally unchanged. Structurally, the dreaming Robin is as passive as Nemo, for all the character's apparent proactivity - removed from the passage of time and so, in Eco's words, "forgets the problems which are at [time's] base, that is, the existence of freedom, the possibility of planning, the necessity of carrying plans out, the sorrow that such planning

entails, the responsibility that it implies, and, finally, the existence of an entire human community whose progressiveness is based on making plans."

Neither Nemo nor Robin grow any older, no matter how many different nights they may spend dreaming, so neither of them can engage in a potential future. Comics scholar Ole Frahm suggests that this may be one of the major drawcards for young audiences:

"Comics are not interesting for children because they are easy to read but because figures like Mickey Mouse, Asterix, or the underestimated Germain Digidags, are always shown as small people that are confronted with bigger ones. And what is more important: they are not lacking anything. Little Nemo, Snoopy or Calvin dream of being bigger precisely because they do not want to grow up."

The reasons why audiences who are invested in a 'serious' Batman reject Robin are more complex than simply a reaction against a camp reading. If adult readers demand that their superheroes grow up along with them, a character who willfully refuses to be excited at the prospect of maturity is difficult to take.

Many of the dream-stories starring Robin were solo adventures without Batman. Despite this type of adventure increasing in frequency in the 1970s, when Robin was 'aged up' and became a college student living away from Batman, the dream-stories were entirely absent. When the 1980s saw the return of a younger, adolescent Robin, the dream motif also appeared once more. Page layouts in Batman issue #373 took up Nemo's classic rhythm of the final lower-right panel depicting the moment

when a concerned adult - here Batman - shakes awake the dreamer. Multiple villains appeared with powers capable of manipulating dreams and nightmares.

Overt homage to McCay's work was discouraged by the DC team of the era, with Neil Gaiman's appropriation of the structure of the Nemo page in his *Sandman* title scaled back for fear of copyright violation. Despite this, nods to Nemo continued in *Batman*, leading up to the overt homage on the cover of *Batman* #377, which recreates one of the most famous images from the *Slumberland* stories: a huge, long-legged bed walking through the air above a cityscape. Robin sits in Nemo's place.

Though Nemo's essential passivity seems at odds with Robin's active participation in adventures, the influence of one on the other is obvious. Nemo was the first young character to have sustained, non-comedic adventures in the medium of comics, and Robin interacts with that legacy through both inspiration and reaction.

As comics evolved in the decades following Nemo, other young characters emerged, including Junior of Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* comic strips. As with *Little Nemo*, homages to Junior in comics featuring Robin became more overt in the 1980s but were present throughout Robin's history.

The Junior/Robin similarities are not only in character but also in history. The 1960s are looked back on with a dim view by contemporary creators of both comics, despite the popularity of the stories at the time.

Junior's impact on Robin began three decades prior to this, in 1933. Chester Gould introduced the character into the *Dick Tracy* cast in that year, and Bob Kane - *Batman*'s creator, and co-

creator of Robin - wrote in his autobiography that Junior was "the only boy assistant in comics" for characters such as Robin to take as a template. Junior, as Robin would be seven years later, was an orphan taken in by the title character and given the dual helper/hostage role in stories.

Dick Tracy and Batman's semi-surreal cityscapes were crucial in evoking the mood of their comics. Both comics began during the Great Depression, when the need for escapist fictions was strongly present in potential audiences. Both comics continued throughout, and ultimately survived, the industry crackdowns of the 1950s despite their violent content.

When the general quality of life improved, however, the appeal of gritty urban crime dramas waned: society's dreams were getting bigger. Dick Tracy and Batman both shifted into science fiction. This generic change is now viewed as a mis-step, but it can be argued that this view is itself a retcon; history, as written from the subjective viewpoint of a later time, skewed by the biases of those acting as the historians. Max Allan Collins, a contributor to both Dick Tracy and Batman in later decades, is quoted in a book which charts the history of Dick Tracy as dismissing the era completely: "Dick Tracy did not belong in space. He belonged in a squad car." Collins' first act as writer on Dick Track was a storyline which removed all traces of the space-based narrative from the strip.

Even those who recognize the science fiction era of the two comics as having value do so through guarded language. Jack Schiff, Batman editor at the time of the sci-fi shift, would later describe the plots of that era as "a little far out" in Les Daniels' book about Batman's history. Later editor Dennis O'Neil, in the foreword to the *Batman in the 70s* collection, declared them "Batman lite". Dick Tracy's history book treats its own sci-fi era

little better: "This period in Tracy does serve as an important counterpoint... in that the moon sequence does get us to think about the respective roles of fact and fantasy".

In the foreword to his best-known work, the graphic novel *Road to Perdition*, Max Allan Collins notes that his writing often contains themes of "the parent/child relationship, in a context of danger and violence." His storylines for both Dick Tracy and Batman highlight this same aspect of the characters' worlds.

Collins' time as writer on the Batman title immediately follows the history-wipe described by Will Brooker earlier. No longer did Batman's past have to include aliens, time travel, and space ships; that era was deleted even more easily than Collins' similar fix-up of Dick Tracy. It was a point in time in which both texts were brought back to what their current writer perceived as the heart of the tale: a fantastical urban detective drama.

Collins laid bare just how closely aligned he felt the two titles were, penning a one-page article entitled "The Batman/Dick Tracy Connection" in the back of Batman issue #402. Pointing out the stories' many similarities - "an array of grotesque villains whose physiognomies mirrored their colorful monikers" - Collins concluded that "Batman was, essentially, Dick Tracy in superhero drag." This appraisal, in turn, leaves the role of Robin to Junior.

Collins' plots re-wrote Robin's past into a replication of Junior's pre-Tracy life as a petty criminal. The homage proved to have an uneven popularity, and the Junior story was replaced by a different Robin origin before the decade's end. The mark of Junior's influence on Robin remained, however; this is arguably due to the fact that the connection between the two figures pre-dated Collins' work by half a century.

Bruce Timm, one of the main creative forces behind the critically acclaimed and highly popular Batman cartoons of the 1990s, talked about the live-action film adaptation of Dick Tracy in an interview with *Comicology* magazine, describing the movie as having "a good feel to it" and "a great look", and saying that he'd tried to bring influences from Dick Tracy into the style of his Batman cartoon. He rejected the new Robin back-story then being used in the comics in favor of the earlier, Junior-inspired version, which he described on the cartoon's DVD commentary as a "really good origin story".

Robin's connection to Junior is important not only because it crossed genres from detective drama to sci-fi and back again, but because it crossed media as well: Gould's comic strip influenced Kane's comic book, and yet the Dick Tracy film's impact on Timm's cartoon was independent of the roots each had in sequential art.

Beyond the specifics of comics history there is a broad collage of traditions and archetypes which form Robin. Some are extremely general, others more particular. The detective's assistant has been a part of the detective genre since its earliest stories, such as Edgar Allen Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue*. The assistant acts as a sounding-board for the main character, so that exposition can be conveyed through dialog. As the number of detective stories grew the technique was taken up by more and more writers, and became a stylistic convention.

Sherlock Holmes, very probably the most famous detective in fiction, was mirrored by his sidekick Dr Watson, who was intrinsic to the narrative and structure of the Holmes stories. When the early Batman comics lost focus, the problem seemed obvious: "Batman needed a Watson to talk to," writer Bill Finger

is quoted as saying in Bob Kane's autobiography. "That's how Robin came to be."

Robin's usefulness in this role was not lost on other creators in the comics industry. The book *Comic Book Makers* includes a note from Kane's rival Joe Simon to editor Martin Goodman, scribbled beside an early drawing of the superhero Captain America: "I think he should have a kid buddy or he'll be talking to himself all the time."

Even more general than the detective's assistant role is that of the helper, which is one of the archetypal characters included in Joseph Campbell's deconstruction of the myth form *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Campbell includes the messenger-god Mercury as the classical version of the helper. Mercury acts as scribe and herald, and is the patron god of traders, gymnasts and tricksters. His sandals have small wings on the heels, a design echoed in the wing-like backs of Robin's boots. Gerard Jones' book *Men of Tomorrow*, which details the beginnings of the comics industry, reveals that Bob Kane originally intended to call Batman's boy sidekick by the name Mercury.

Though the helper plays a vital part in traditional hero-stories, the subordinate nature of a supporting role makes it less appealing for some readers. Jim Steranko, a comic book creator, explained in *Comic Book Makers* that "no kid wanted to be Bucky if he could be Captain America instead... Robin was the second choice, a bit player, when young imaginations became their favourite heroes."

These negative associations remain in many depictions of the helper role to this day. A 2001 episode of the NBC sitcom *Scrubs* featured a dream sequence in which the show's lead character, JD, imagines himself as Robin to a Batman played by his best

friend. JD exclaims miserably "Holy inferiority complex, Batman! How low is my self-esteem that I'm the sidekick in my own fantasy?"

Scrubs has been strongly criticized by nursing advocacy groups for setting the doctor-nurse relationship as a "master-servant fantasy". This compromises the show's ability to make commentary on the value of roles other than that of the central protagonist, and highlights the difficulties in validating any kind of helper role in modern popular culture.

Robin's helper status is complicated by the character's frequent position as "the Boy Hostage", a term coined by writer Frank Miller as a play on Robin's original subtitle "the Boy Wonder" - a title later joined by variants "the Teen Wonder" and "the Girl Wonder", depending on the age and gender of the Robin at the time. A helper character is one charged with rescuing, not being in need of rescue. This dual conflicting requirement is largely based around the fact that Robin, as well as being the helper, must often stand in the narrative space filled by the hero's imperiled love interest.

A much-circulated panel on the internet, originating from 1966's *Justice League of America* #44, features four superheroes worrying about the fate of their loved ones. The Atom, the Flash, and Green Lantern all fret for wives or fiancées, while Batman exclaims "ROBIN -- what have I done to you?"

The helper archetype itself has long been associated with transgressive and queer readings of texts in which it appears. Academic writer Judith Roof suggests that this type of figure inhabits "a part of the narrative not completely aligned with the heteronormative drives of mainstream cinematic narrative", but the position dates back to far earlier story traditions than film. A

helper's closeness to their same-sex hero can never be comfortably resolved in a text which does not allow for a queer conclusion, but neither can it be ignored. The story requires it to remain in-between these two extremes, in a constant state of potential.

An alternative archetype to the helper which Robin fits within is the trickster. Not strictly a law-abider, but yet not a law-breaker, Robin's morality is self-defined. The trickster figure "personifies marginality... [is] the hesitant avatar of this region of thresholds and boundaries, this 'realm of pure possibility'," according to Larry Ellis' article "Trickster: Shaman of the Liminal".

The two most direct influences on Robin from legend and literature are Robin Hood and Peter Pan, who are both tricksters. Bob Kane's autobiography tells of how Robin was named after Robin Hood, specifically the Douglas Fairbanks version of the character. Robin Hood scholar Stephen Knight has suggested that the Fairbanks film emphasizes the strong trickster vein in the character, going on to explain that:

"The Robin Hood figure is not always a very long ways away from the Puck figure, the forest sprite who is playful, mischievous. There is strong sense of what is coming through the tradition is true, organic law, rather than false, imposed law. And that's something that I think is not far from the full-developed trickster tradition. I think it's a social bandit coupled with a trickster tradition inherently."

The Puck figure, best known in the context of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is traditionally a generic catch-all name for the tricksters of European superstition. Shakespeare combined the established myth with the folkloric character Robin Goodfellow.

As well as associations with clothing such as Robin's later costume of green tights, Robin Hood is often depicted in red. A red tunic is the common focal point of all the variations of the Robin costume. For Robin Hood, this color was worn "not only to prevent him being shot by mistake, but also to show that he is not afraid of being shot", according to Robin Hood scholar Lois Potter's book *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries*.

Stephen Knight also argues that the vigilante aspects of the Robin Hood figure link the myth to queer interpretations:

"The tradition is seething with a strongly coded sexuality, that is curiously uncoupled from conventional morality because of its coding and so is in the contemporary American critical language 'queer', resistant to authority like any outlaw - and so if described as 'gay' presumably all the more shocking."

Peter Pan has also been the subject of queer readings, with theorist Marjorie Garber describing the character's connection to Captain Hook as "a dream and nightmare of transvestism", a description which could equally apply to Robin and Batman's nemesis the Joker.

J.M. Barrie, author of the original Peter Pan stories, described the character as both a boy and a bird, and declared him to be "betwixt and between". Both Peter and Robin carry within them a tension between the eternal and the mortal child. Scott Beatty's *Gotham Knights* comics have had Batgirl refer to Batman and his Robins as "a bunch of Lost Boys", borrowing the name of Peter's gang of perpetual children.

"This image of 'lost children'," writer Deborah Cartmell explains, speaking about Peter Pan's original Lost Boys, "echoes both the potentially brutal short lives of the young and offers an anecdote to death itself while the lost boys remain on the island." So too are Robins protected from their inevitable death or aging through the timelessness of the comics medium, yet in constant interaction with their potential fate.

References to Robin as a "good soldier" began in the twentieth Batman issue, in 1944, and gained a high frequency of appearances after 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns*. Bill Willingham, writer on the Robin title from 2004 to 2007, made the connection between Robin and soldiers explicit, describing his intentions and narrative choices in the Big Hollywood Blog article "Superheroes: Still Plenty of Super, But Losing Some of the Hero":

"I made sure both Batman and Robin were portrayed as good, steadfast heroes, with unshakable personal codes and a firm grasp of their mission. I even got to do a story where Robin parachuted into Afghanistan with a group of very patriotic military superheroes on a full-scale, C130 gunship-supported combat mission."

"Good soldier" constructs Robin as not simply and archetypal helper-figure within Batman's story, but as playing the more specific role of a disciple in a crusade -- usually against the underworld of Gotham City, with occasional diversions into more literal interpretations such as Willingham's.

While this narrower definition as a vigilante urban crusader may appear to reduce the possibilities available to Robin as a figure under the broader designations of helper or trickster, the history of "good soldiers" remains a rich one.

During the American Civil War, stories and novels for young readers included child hero characters so often that it became a cliché of the time. These drummer boys and helpers "could soften gruff soldiers and inspire them to live up to the moral and social expectations of the time," according to James Marten's history *The Children's Civil War*. This role is echoed in Robin's explanation in the comics that Batman needs Robin "to temper him. Or to remind him of hope."

But Robin is not simply a child character within a soldier story; Robin is the soldier in question. To be a "good soldier" is not synonymous with being a good warrior or a good knight. A good soldier is a combatant who is highly trained in the art of following orders handed down by officers, in much the same way that the function of a sidekick follows the needs of their leader-hero.

As Catherine Williamson, drawing on the work of Foucault, writes in the article "Draped Crusaders: Disrobing Gender in The Mask of Zorro":

"The soldier's body is functionally passive, docile, in that it 'may be subjected, used, transformed and improved'. Such passivity is actually desired, since the body grows more useful as it becomes more obedient, and vice versa. The "docile" body of the soldier complicate the notions of "activity", masculinity, and heterosexuality assigned to military figures. Being a good "soldier" means [...] being a body capable of manipulating its own gender characteristics and, by extension, sexual orientation."

The queer re-interpretation of Batman comics performed by young gay readers of the 1940s can be linked to the first

appearance of the "good soldier" name - Robin's body, as that of a soldier, is under the total control of his commander Batman, and all characteristics of Robin's body therefore exist for the ends required by its commander.

Robin's bare-legged and bright uniform is another element of the character's connection to the soldier figure. Germaine Greer writes that the large areas of exposed skin on young soldiers in classical paintings and sculpture "can be seen to serve two functions, on the one hand to confer upon him heroic qualities and on the other to stress his vulnerability."

Just as Robin borrows Robin Hood's red tunic to display a lack of fear of death, the vulnerability of the young soldier described by Greer is a crucial aspect of the figure. The danger carried within the young soldier has real-world historical precedent: the book *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* tells how junior officers of the First World War, in their distinctive uniforms unlike those of other soldiers, were hit by the largest losses - "for all their bravery, they were marked men".

The theme of the dead young hero was highly popular during the medieval era, when it was used to structure epic narratives. The book *A History of Young People in the West* explains that:

"It is the schema of the disaster overcome, and it always begins with the sacrifice of a young man – one of the best of the young men. In avenging his death, the group regains its cohesion, recovers its monopoly on victory, and renews its power. In sacrificing his own life, the hero allows the community to regenerate: this, it seems, is the essential function of the young man in epic literature."

Two characters in the Robin role have been killed in the field, Jason Todd and Stephanie Brown. In each case, their loss provides a motivating force for the remaining characters and drives them to rekindle fading relationships with one another. Jason is memorialized in the Bat Cave by a glass case containing his Robin costume, marked with a plaque reading "Jason Todd: A Good Soldier". Stephanie's death was not marked by a similar memorial, which led to a protest campaign by feminist readers of the Batman comics titles in 2006. This situation, and its impact on the comics, is detailed in the second half of this study.

Dick Grayson, first of the Robins, has in the last few decades sometimes been given a Rom racial and cultural background; in other words, he's a Gypsy. As David Malvinni explains in the book *The Gypsy Caravan: From Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music and Film*, popular culture's conventions have shaped 'Gypsy' into a character trait which signifies "ambiguous, malleable, unstable"; characteristics which match those present in other aspects of Robin -- as does Malvinni's observation that in literature a gypsy "has no concern for future realities", seeing only "the here-and-now".

A far more present and constant aspect of Dick Grayson than his occasional ethnicity is his early life as a circus aerialist. He and his parents are an acrobat team who perform under the name 'The Flying Graysons', until an extortion racket preying on the circus has them killed. Dick is the only survivor.

Germaine Greer has suggested that the figure of the exposed boy soldier in classical art may be related "to the naked gymnasts and athletes who competed in the public festivals". In Robin, the two figures are blended into one.

Helen Stoddart's *Rings of Desire* explains that an acrobatic body is "potentially both awesomely and disturbingly physical", a tension taken up in modern pop culture by the superhero. The connection between the two figures is articulated by the book *American Carnival* in the following terms:

"The 'superhuman' clothed in a leotard or acrobatic outfit parallels the superheroes of America's comic books. Indeed, when part of the acrobatic act involves an apparent audience member who discards her or his own regular clothing and performs amazing feats, the formula for the superhero is born. Yet, such superhuman performance is presented within the circus act as achievable to the 'ordinary' individual; the circus proves an arena for the transition from regular identity to the realms of fantasy."

Once again, Robin dwells in a space of transition – not only through the nomadic, placeless nature of the circus caravan, but also at the junction of reality and fantasy. As with concepts of sexuality and age, this existence within a moment suspended between two states is articulated in the image of Robin, the acrobatic aerialist, swinging through the air on a cord.

The modern history of the aerialist began in 1859, when Jules Leotard developed an acrobatic routine in which he swung from one trapeze to another in mid air, seeming to fly between them. Reviews saw him as moving "as lightly as a bird" and described his costumes as "bright plumage". Robin, named for a bird, echoes these descriptions.

Rapidly, trapeze artistry became a profession which privileged the illusion of weightlessness and gravity-defying grace over the strength required to perform such tricks, and traditional forms of masculinity found in circus performers (the parodic buffoonery of clowns, the showy bravado of the strongmen)

seemed out of place in this arena. Publications of the time, quoted in *Rings of Desire*, declared that "women excel as equilibrists" while men "take a second rank."

The aerialist began as a figure with unstable gendering, so it's not surprising that as soon as the femininity of the figure began to dominate, hints of masculinity within it began to intrigue. In 1868, diarist Arthur J. Munby described a show in which he watched "the wondrous Azella leaping from bar to bar like a man".

Munby offers an account of seeing a "sturdy wellknit little fellow" perform, describing "broad shoulders and a round plump smiling face".

"He showed both pluck and skill; he climbed the rope, and hung from the trapeze by one hand or one foot... There was nothing weak or feminine about the boy, but remembering how many female acrobats there are just now, I asked a girl who stood near to me in the crowd... whether the young performer were a boy or a girl."

The "handsome ephebic boy" Dr Wertham described seeing in Robin's early depictions matches exactly this physical description, and though Robin originally bore the title of 'Boy Wonder', it is possible to read the ambiguity present in Munby's scene in this early art also, especially when one takes into account that at least one of the 'Boy Wonders' was female.

This was Carrie Kelley, the first – but not only – female Robin. The second was Stephanie Brown, but she was a self-identified 'Girl Wonder'. Carrie, of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* stories, was inspired by comics artist John Byrne's declaration that "Robin must be a girl".

However, Carrie is as much of an androgyne as the male Robins who preceded her. As well as being referred to as the 'Boy Wonder', she has a body distinctly pre-pubertal and genderless

in the artwork. If the story were re-written with Carrie as a boy, only the text would require reworking; the pictures could stay exactly as they are. Here, as much as in the early depictions described by Wertham, is a Robin who could be Munby's unknown young acrobat.

Frank Miller's early Batman work plays heavily with imagery borrowed from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels – Batman's story begins when a young Bruce Wayne, chasing a rabbit, falls down a hole into what will eventually become his personal Wonderland, the Bat Cave. Doppelgangers, shadow-selves, and mirror images abound. After defeating a villain, Batman declares despairingly that he sees “a reflection.”

The first full-length panel we see of Carrie in her Robin uniform puts us inside a mirror with her reflection, looking out through the glass at her as she adjusts her costume. Neither face in the image can be definitively said to be an inversion – one may be a reflection, but it is given perspective as if it, too, were real. The 'truth' of Robin exists somewhere between the two figures, suspended in the space between being and nonexistence.

It is often the role of the sidekick to be the recorder of the hero's exploits. The Sherlock Holmes stories are written as the recollections of Dr Watson; Xena's adventures as a Warrior Princess are recorded by the bard Gabrielle; the hobbit Samwise is charged with the completion and keeping of *The Lord of the Rings*. In Batman texts, this duty is fulfilled by Robin's "War Journals", which often act as the narration-boxes in comics stories.

The acknowledgment of reality as a potential story told by Robin is given complexity by the fact that Batman stories are rarely without a visual element such as a comic-book panel or movie scene. From Robin's first appearance, the character has

interacted with the structural aspects of its existence - Robin's first comic book cover, *Detective Comics* #38, shows the character bursting through paper, as if through the cover of the issue itself. In this same debut story, Robin catches criminals by taking identifying photographs of them – creating framed images, which are something comics themselves cannot exist without.

Later stories repeated these ideas in similar patterns: the third Robin, Tim Drake, first becomes part of the Batman story when he is photographed as a small child attending the circus where Dick Grayson performs. Later, Tim proves his detective skills to Dick and Bruce by stealthily photographing them while they are at work as Robin and Batman. The fourth Robin, Stephanie, watches Tim – and is in turn watched by Batman – through a pair of binoculars, and snaps a self-portrait of herself in the Robin costume with a camera as evidence of her assumption of the role. After she is killed, photographs of her body during autopsy are used by the character Oracle as a method of dissuading the teenage girl hero Misfit from becoming one of the Bat family.

Devices which in some way create a framed image, such as "cameras, periscopes, magnifying glasses, video and movie cameras" are described by Anne Allison's book *Permitted and Prohibited Desires* as a frequent feature of erotomanga, a form of sexually explicit comic which is usually Japanese in origin. To have a "looking machine" within the story allows for self-insertion by the audience: the appreciated object is being observed within a frame by the characters, just as it is being looked at inside a panel by the reader.

Though the intended purpose of superhero comics differs from that of erotomanga, a character with a camera can still be read

in the same way. Robin and the reader both see Batman within the margins and confines of framed images.

When presented as the subject of the lens's gaze, Robin does not display discomfort, with the book *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* pointing out that in one interview sequence in *The Dark Knight Returns* Robin is "the only one who did not stare wide-eyed into the camera."

Academic Roberta Pearson, writing about the 1989 Tim Burton film version of Batman's world, observed that the Joker engages in a "hijacking of signs" by defacing framed paintings in an art gallery. Batman, meanwhile, "*calls up rather than cuts up*" images via his surveillance equipment.

Robin, in contrast to both Batman and the Joker, *creates* images, framing that which is seen and, by extension, deciding what remains unseen beyond the edges of the photos. *Reading Comics* describes the character as "simultaneously engaged in the present and in a position to critically reflect on this present" - Robin is not only an in-between; Robin can in fact decide where the center and edges of meaning are in the first place.

The 1960s Batman television show had unexpected cultural impact as soon as it began to air, and the second section of this study will explore a little of just how long-ranging that impact proved to be. One of the earliest instances was that a nightclub opened outside San Francisco called Wayne Manor, where the dancing girls on their platform above the crowd were all dressed up like Robin.

Cross-dressing and Robin seem to go hand in hand, well beyond the role's uniform. In one of the early newspaper comic

strips starring Batman and Robin, Bruce Wayne attends a costume party dressed as Louis XVI. Dick Grayson accompanies him, decked out in the full ballgown and wig of Marie Antionette. In another storyline, Tim Drake has to dress up as a sexy young woman - named Caroline, no less, the name of the earlier, female Robin Carrie Kelley - to go undercover. "This is SO not cool," Tim complains. "Being ROBIN is cool and this AIN'T it."

Both disguises are not simply female; they are overtly and heavily gendered as such. Robin expresses discomfort at the costumes, but this unease is equally present when the character is faced with a hyper-masculine role: when DC Comics decided to create a tougher, meaner leader for the Bat family in the 1990s (Bruce Wayne having been momentarily put out of commission), the character Azrael was created especially, rather than any of the Robin characters being promoted.

The Azrael storyline is noteworthy also for the symbolic role which Azrael's lack of a Robin plays. He throws Tim out of the Cave almost immediately, and numerous panels thereafter are devoted to lingering shots on the empty seat on the passenger side of the Batmobile. The message is clear: Batman without Robin is a jerk, a big mean bully in a stupid costume.

Underneath the obviously cross-dressed disguises-on-top-of-disguises, the Robin costume in all its brightness waits as a puzzle itself. Photorealist comics artist Alex Ross laments of the Robin costume:

"There's no point in trying to make his costume look tough, or menacing, or even practical. With Robin you don't have a choice - it's those gaudy colors or nothing."

Indeed, when Jason Todd was killed by the Joker, the *Wall Street Journal* article about the plot twist wore the headline 'Given His Costume, It's a Wonder He Didn't Die of Embarrassment'.

So Tim Drake, taking the role next, was given an updated design, complete with leather tabi boots, a long black cape and, most importantly, tights. When the new look was unveiled, newspapers once again jumped on the story, remarking that "Batman's Boy Friend is finally wearing pants."

And again, when Stephanie Brown became Robin, the newspapers were there to commentate: "it was the first time in the continuum of the comic books that the yellow cape, red vest and green tights have belonged to a girl. It was also the first time that the outfit seemed appropriate."

In the comics themselves, a similar sentiment is expressed: in the first issue of *Harley Quinn*, a title starring the Joker's sometimes-girlfriend, actors portray the Dynamic Duo for a television program. Robin is a dark-haired, voluptuous young woman. One of the producers remarks "I know some story say that kid's a GUY - but in a costume like THAT? C'mon - this is FAMILY entertainment!"

One of the many pop genres which Batman and Robin draw on in their makeup is the classic gothic monster tale: they are the silhouette of the caped figure against the moon, animal-like silhouettes in the night. Unsurprisingly, werewolves and vampires have both featured in Batman and Robin stories, sometimes in ways which make the parallels specific: in one story, when Robin is confined to a house and his civilian identity, unable to respond to the Bat Signal in the sky, the narration boxes read

"A boy goes nearly mad, torn by the bizarre beacon's
silently strident lure.

He feels like a werewolf under the moon.

He wants to change into something wilder and chase
through the night."

Another storyline from the same era, appearing in *Detective Comics* #517, features a temporarily-vampiric Batman phrasing his condition in terms which could equally apply to repressed queer desire:

"I have NEEDS now, Alfred -- dirty, horrible needs --
-- needs I CAN'T CONTROL!"

Another story, this one outside of standard continuity and entitled *Red Rain: Red Robin*, sees two of the Robins -- Jason and Dick -- as vampire hunters pitted against a vampire Batman. Batman bites and kills Dick, transforming him into a vampire. Batman's final, subtext-laden narration, over an image of the pair, is as follows:

"My search is over.

We are as we were meant to be.

Bound by death.

Creatures of the night.

Together.

Forever."

John C Wright's essay in the collection *Batman Unauthorized* explains the crossover appeal between the horror genre and Batman:

"Human psychology has two basic reactions to darkness and horror: the first is to be horrified, as if we saw a monster; the second is to be curious about what it would be like to horrify, as if we were the monster. For those of us who are not particular fans of stories told from the point of view of vampires, that curiosity can be made palatable if the horrific monster preys only on the guilty."

This analysis fails to see the broad range of potential Batman fans: it is quite possible to be a fan of Batman and also of vampires, hence the stories which include both. Alexander Doty, in his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, offers the reminder that that it's "important to consider how the central conventions of horror and melodrama actually encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry."

Gothic monsters have other connections to multiple recurring themes found in Robin as well, with the journalist Jason Nahrung explaining in his article "Vampires Still Have Bite" that "in some ways, vampirism is a metaphor for adolescence, an in-between state of not belonging, one of sexual and gender confusion."

The references go both ways: the highly popular *Twilight* series

by Stephenie Meyer, vampire romances aimed at a teen audience, has two characters assume secret identities as a man and his adopted ward, "like Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson".

From acrobats to vampires, urchins to tricksters, Robin's source material is varied and yet internally coherent: all elements share the common trait of being in flux, and outside that which can easily be described as mainstream or normal.

But what happens when that stops being present in the Robin character itself?

Part Two: Where Robin went

Robin's power as a figure of transgression in popular culture has waned in recent years, as a static status quo has been increasingly imposed on the character by its copyright owners, DC Comics/Time Warner. This situation is most obvious in the examples of Kelly McQuain's short story 'Je T'Aime, Batman, Je T'Adore', from the collection *Best American Erotica 1999*, and Mark Chamberlain's homoerotic watercolor exhibition 'Urban Myths'. DC Comics reacted to both of these instances of reappropriation with legal action, thereby refusing to allow Robin to enter the wider cultural context of reimagined folk figures, which would have provided the character with a renewed strength as an icon.

Kelly McQuain's 'Je T'Aime, Batman, Je T'Adore' appeared in the first printing of the anthology *Best American Erotica 1999*, edited by Susie Bright. Later editions of the collection were published without McQuain's story, after legal pressure from DC Comics forced its removal.

"Joker, Penguin and Catwoman and now me," McQuain's press release on the matter read. "I've joined Batman's Rogue's Gallery as Bat-enemy number one."

The combination of fond knowledge about the world of Batman - listing his usual enemies and a refusal to trust that world as a serious text which McQuain's press release offers is also to be found in the story itself. 'Je T'Aime' takes as its starting point the 1960s live-action television show, mimicking its distinctive dialog patterns and oversaturated characterization style in the telling of an adolescent crush felt by Robin for Batman.

McQuain's press release went on to explain that the story was based on "dreams and fantasies from [his] childhood and adolescence."

This rationale is echoed in Mark Chamberlain's statements on his 'Urban Myths' exhibition:

"In this body of work, I am taking a homoerotic subtext of Batman and bringing it to full relief, while giving form to a few personal fantasies in the process," Chamberlain explained in a statement on his gallery's website. "I am recreating the characters of Batman and Robin in small watercolors and oil paintings, in which I explore blunt sexuality, suppressed romance, whimsy, camp and various forms of male bonding. In the process I play on the homoerotic element that has always veiled the characters, and to some extent the more culturally conservative social context of the 1950s from which the characters emerged ... I think gay men understand instinctively that Batman and Robin stories can be read as a queer narrative. We relate to the secrecy, fraternity, removal and fetish wear, especially in adolescence. When I was five years old and would watch Batman on TV, I thought that the idea of these two men

running around in a cave wearing masks and tights was so hot I was mesmerized."

Both Chamberlain and McQuain contextualize the concept of 'Robin' as belonging to the 1960s television program, rather than the comics DC Comics was publishing at the time the short story and the paintings were created. Both McQuain and Chamberlain spoke of Robin as having played a role in their own early sexual development. Just as the figures of the daredevil adolescent and young detective naturally evolved into Robin, this incorporation and reimagination of Robin through the development of contemporary artists influenced by work featuring the character would seem to be an organic progression.

DC Comics' continued copyright over the character, however, meant that the only depictions of Robin permitted to remain in the public sphere were those sanctioned as appropriate. The comics-industry blog *Lying in the Gutters*, written by Rich Johnson, queried why DC Comics had come down so hard on Chamberlain's exhibition.

"So what is it about Mark Chamberlain's pieces that proved so objectionable? ... I didn't hear DC kick off about a couple of piece about Andy Warhol... Could it really be the homosexuality aspect that puts it over the edge?"

This question was followed by a description of "The Authority", a DC comic featuring a gay marriage between two high-profile superheroes. The next part of the sequence of questions, "the sexualization of a minor?" was followed by images of Supergirl's midriff-baring costume.

"Maybe it's just a culmination of all things that turns what

would appear to be fair use of brand symbols to create new works of art with new associations. Either way it appears to be a PR disaster," Johnson concluded.

Kelly McQuain's press release pointed out that "it wasn't [McQuain] who added a codpiece and aroused nipples to [Batman's] costume in the recent spate of Bat-movies! If Batman's homoeroticism is so worrisome, the powers that be have themselves to thank."

The 'Bat-movies' McQuain referenced are those directed by Joel Schumacher, 1995's *Batman Forever* and 1997's *Batman and Robin*. While these films are technically 'official' in a way Chamberlain and McQuain's works will never be, they are nevertheless almost wholly disregarded by those subsequent Batman text wishing to assert their own seriousness.

An episode of the critically acclaimed *Batman Adventures* animated series by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm, entitled "Tales of the Dark Knight", sees a group of children who each resemble a different era's Robin recount stories about their versions of Batman. There is little commonality between the smiling hero in the rosy-cheeked, round-faced, dark-haired boy's tale and the gruff, violent vigilante spoken of by the angular red-haired girl in glasses, but there is one thing about which even a Golden Age Dick Grayson and Frank Miller's Carrie Kelley can agree: when they encounter a flamboyant young boy in a feather boa named Joel, they dismiss his story about Batman as stupid nonsense.

This message of universal dismissal of Schumacher's version of Batman and Robin removes the queer subtext of the films from the endorsed version of the figures, where it may have otherwise provided a contemporary camp facet to otherwise

homogenized and staid characters.

Entertainment Weekly's commentary on the actor playing Robin, Chris O'Donnell, becomes in this context a daydream as wistful as those of McQuain and Chamberlain:

"Chris O'Donnell's batsuit features a strikingly commodious codpiece ... 'Batman Forever' is, in fact, emblematic of the new, mutual inclusiveness - the *give* and *take* and *take back* - of gay and straight audiences."

Robin and Batman are company-owned, rather than creator-owned, characters, and those creators who are given opportunity to utilize them do so under strict control. Nevertheless, the intentions of individual authors are the driving force behind the choices which the characters make.

Devin Grayson, a female comics writer who was responsible for a variety of DC Comics titles for many years, has been quite upfront about the fact that she understands and supports a queer reading of the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson. She elaborated her position in an online interview, her answer running some 1700 words and reading, in part:

"My guess is that this would have started with a question. Dick, in an arbitrary moment in the Batcave, asking something like "what happens to me after I turn eighteen? What happens to us after those... papers... stop meaning anything...?" To which Bruce would respond, as most likely would anyone who had not been obsessing about this particular potential end of the world for months on end, "hm?"

"So maybe Dick stops using language. Maybe he moves close to Batman suddenly, grim and determined in an oddly thrilled sort of way, heat radiating off of him in waves as he suddenly presses his lips against Batman's -- irresistible force hurtling towards immovable object."

These events have never been depicted in an official DC Comic. Independent comics artist Audrey Fox, reading the Devin Grayson interview, illustrated a scene based on Devin's description (I use the author's first name here not as any mark of disrespect, but rather to avoid confusion with the character of the same surname). Devin publicly praised and endorsed Fox's artwork online.

Compare the scene described above to this excerpt from the DC Comics-published Gotham Knights #14, also written by Devin. A letter written by an adult Dick Grayson to Bruce Wayne reads in part:

"Ward. I HATE that word. It stopped having any MEANING the minute I turned EIGHTEEN, and I was afraid I would, too.

Stop having MEANING, I mean, for YOU.

So, in the absence of binding WORDS, I try to show you who I am in ACTION.

And I find I can't stop MOVING."

The motivations and context of the kissing scene remain in this second passage, even with the kiss itself remaining undepicted in an official DC Comic. Audrey Fox doesn't draw for DC

Comics, but she was the artist responsible for a number of promotional artworks and fund-raising auction pieces for Girl-Wonder.org, a site whose activism in turn impacted on official depictions of Robin.

If Robin's 'real' writer, though not the character's 'real' owner, and a successful fan-activist create a comic depicting a kiss between Batman and Robin, and this same scene is referred to by the writer in her "real" writing about Robin within officially sanctioned DC Comics storylines, the difficulties in drawing a line between canonical Robin elements and illegal hijackings of the character by those such as McQuain and Chamberlain are obvious.

If a kiss happens in the in-between white space after one panel ends and another begins, does it happen at all?

The fractious nature of comics fandom is well-known to those who have any interactions with it, but this propensity for complaint can sometimes galvanize into true activism. This is what occurred in the case of Project Girl Wonder, the protest created as a part of the founding of the website Girl-Wonder.org. It should be said here that I was the person who registered the Girl-Wonder.org domain name and created the original Project.

Here is the original text of the Project Girl Wonder website:

A generation of *Batman* readers grew up with Stephanie Brown, who was a superhero character in the comics for more than a decade. She was a role model and hero for many. Then she was tortured to death in a sequence spanning a number of issues. She was treated as a sexual object, and her murder degraded her and degraded

superhero comics in general. She has never gotten the credit she deserves from DC Comics since, on page or off.

Batman and other superhero stories are the modern age's fables, and if we don't stop the spread of this rot now they will be irrevocably corrupted by it.

Stephanie Brown is a symbol of the need for change. And we're going to see that the change begins.

Project Girl Wonder

"They are our post-industrial folklore, and, as such, they mean much more to people than a few minutes' idle amusement. They're part of the psychic family. The public and apparently callous slaying of one of their number was, to some, a vicious attack on the special part of their souls that needs awe, magic, and heroism."

- Dennis O'Neil, *A Lonely Place of Dying*

"If gender has become a battleground at this time, it is worth asking who fights the battles, who receives the wounds and bears the scars, who dies?"

- Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*

"Was I really Robin?"

"Of course you were."

- Stephanie Brown and Batman, from *War Drums: Act Three*

In 1988, a boy who was Batman's Robin was killed. Batman was grief-stricken. Rightly or wrongly, he blamed himself. But when a girl he failed was killed in 2004, everyone knew who was to blame: her.

The first dead Robin, a male character named Jason, was given a memorial in Batman's cave. This took the form of one of the Robin uniforms Jason had worn, encased in glass with an inscription reading 'A Good Soldier' at its base. This memorial has become an image instantly recognised by any *Batman* reader.

The second dead Robin, a female character named Stephanie, doesn't have a memorial. In fact, DC seems to have forgotten she existed at all.

We haven't.

Project Girl Wonder is a campaign based around a simple idea. It damages the integrity of Batman as a text and as a character to ignore the contribution Stephanie Brown made to the mythology. We believe that our intelligence has been insulted by those in control of these characters and this mythology.

We believe that appropriate acknowledgement of the character's importance will stand as proof that the system is capable of correcting its errors; something which is currently in dire need of proving.

In short,

There should be a memorial case for Stephanie Brown.

Why?

Consider this: Stephanie died of injuries sustained when she was tortured for hours by a power drill. A power drill which has been made into an action figure. These comics

and action figures are not marketed to children, but to have a tool which was used to violate a woman's body be made into a toy displays a disregard for the horrific nature of such acts. It trivializes torture and death in a very specific, demeaning, and sexist way.

When she was being tortured to death, Stephanie was drawn like this and like this. (For a comparison of gender portrayal, this is a panel from the same plotline -- *War Games* -- depicting Jason's murder, and this is artwork from the same period featuring his body.) Her breasts and hips are emphasised and her body is twisted into unlikely but sexually suggestive poses. This is how a teenage girl; a superhero; a **Robin** is depicted as she is being fatally brutalized.

This second image of Stephanie invokes many of the same visual cues later combined in a controversial advertising campaign, wherein many commentators deemed invocation of these cues to be "yet another drop in the bucket of cases of violence against a sexualized woman." Considering that Stephanie had previously been utilised in sensitive, thought-provoking storylines dealing with how the media denies agency to survivors of sexual abuse, to see her reduced to what one fan described as "a body, a puppet. [T]hey took a woman and made her an object" sheds a poor light on many creators capable of far better.

They damaged her, they violated her, they killed her off... and then they forgot her.

In *Detective Comics* #818 (2006), Batman says of his current Robin, Tim Drake: "He's so alone. His father gone. Conner, his best friend, dead." No mention of Stephanie, whom

Tim had been in a romantic relationship with **for longer than he'd even known Conner**. No mention of the young woman who had been Batman's **partner** during the same period of time as the death of Tim's father.

We're not trying to argue that Conner's death and the death of Tim's father weren't hugely important things for that character. They were. But so was Stephanie's death, and there's never been a satisfying acknowledgement of that.

At the same time that *Detective Comics* #818 was on the stands, the Executive Editor of DC Comics, Dan Didio, did an interview with Newsarama.com. When asked by one audience member about the spate of violent deaths of female characters, Didio responded:

Their deaths had a major impact on our heroes and their lives, and will continue to do so in the year to come.

Statements such as this fail to include any reader who considered **Stephanie** a hero; she is reduced to nothing but a plot element in the male heroes' stories.

Coupled with Batman's remark on the deaths which had left Tim alone, this answer made it painfully apparent that DC needs us to remind them how important Stephanie was, because otherwise they're going to keep ignoring her and then blatantly lying to us about doing it.

*Well, I don't know about **you**, but **I** didn't like her. Not everybody did, you know.*

We know. But not everybody liked Jason Todd. Lots and lots of Batman readers didn't. He was, infamously, killed off due to a phone-poll of audience opinions. He still got a memorial. Perceived popularity amongst a particular chunk of your assumed demographic is not a logical basis from which to argue that Stephanie does not deserve the same treatment.

And this **isn't** an issue about whether a character was popular or not. It's a very clear, neat, clean example of sexism in superhero comic books. Jason Todd got a memorial; Stephanie Brown didn't. It sends a message that Boy Wonders matter, but Girl Wonders don't. Comics can do better than that.

We love comics. But it's very hard to do so when we're given characters like Stephanie only to have it taken away again in a brutal, offensive manner. Then we were shown quite clearly that she didn't matter anyway. It's an insult to our intelligence to pretend otherwise; the truth is her character was used, discarded and then forgotten.

There is no excuse which can justify this state of affairs, and those which have been offered ("DiDio pinned the blame on [Stephanie] herself", "we know you'll always be back for further outrages") have simply made the ugliness of this whole situation even more apparent.

We want to be able to look at our "post-industrial folklore" and say: "Once upon a time, Batman had a Robin. She died, as the Robins sometimes did. But he remembered her, and he honored her."

Honor her, DC.

Honor your fables, your industry, and your fans.

Project Girl Wonder was met with aggression and defensiveness from large sections of the comics-fan community, but it also introduced a wide audience to the continued need for vigilance in monitoring gender unfairness in popular media, and helped create the thriving messageboard community which underpins Girl-Wonder.org's continued life.

Within the comics themselves, nods to the increasingly visible protests organised by Project Girl Wonder began to appear -- issue five of the time-traveler Booster Gold's title included a blackboard of scribbled notes listing problems which scientists had noticed in the DC Universe's history; errors which Booster would be able to visit and correct. One of the noted problems was "No Trophy = Stephanie?". The *Teen Titans* title included panels of Tim Drake's "Robin Cave", which featured a case holding Stephanie's earlier Spoiler costume. *Action Comics* went so far as to depict Stephanie's Robin suit in its glass case in several panels of one issue, set in a version of the Batcave many years in the future.

In 2008's *Batman* #673, a sequence inside Bruce Wayne's consciousness showed that the interior of his mind looks like the Batcave. In this Batcave, beside the traditional male-costume Robin case, is one holding Stephanie's uniform.

Girl-Wonder.org, now helmed by others, invited me to write an editorial commenting on the new *Batman* issue.

Project Girl Wonder has led to a number of shout-outs in comics in the year and a half since it began. We've had Rip Hunter wonder "No Trophy = Stephanie?" on his board of

time-travel conundrums. We've had Tim remark in his inner monologue that she never had a memorial in the cave. We've even seen a future Bat Cave in Action Comics with a Stephanie memorial in it.

Batman #673 means so, so much more than any of these. Because, in two panels, we were told everything that mattered: that inside Batman's heart, Stephanie was Robin, the same as Dick and Jason and Tim — her gender made no difference at all to that. That her loss is felt as keenly as those other losses Batman has been shaped by.

In those two panels, in that one gesture of Batman contemplating the Robins he's lost in front of the symbol of those losses, that line of suits in cases, the glass ceiling keeping girls out of the red and green and gold costume at Batman's side finally cracked and fell.

And, as a second gift to those who have stayed angry and stayed outraged all this time, the close of the issue saw a second acknowledgement the things which were so poisonous in the Batman comics a few short years ago: the idea of a hero being tortured to death by power drill. Issue #674 may not come out for another month, but it's probably safe to say that the mistakes of War Games are unlikely to be repeated this time around. Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it, but those who do their best to correct prior errors face a future where something new and better can be built.

Grant Morrison, Tony Daniel, Mike Marts, Jeanine Schaefer, and every single one of the other creators who helped pave the path through the DCU to this moment: Thanks.

By the end of 2008, Stephanie Brown had been brought back from the dead by another writer in an unrelated storyline, and shortly thereafter the same tired writing clichés which had dogged her earlier stint as a superhero began to reemerge in the comics. It scarcely mattered, though, because the truth was already obvious: the sense of ownership which marginalised fangroups – in this case, female readers of superhero comics – felt for the Robin character had become strong enough that these groups were not only capable of vocal objection when Robin's copyright holders "got it wrong", these groups were in fact able to present an argument compelling and high-profile enough that their vision of a corrected reality overtook the originally copyright-sanctioned one as the "true" text in the DC-published comics.

The success of Project Girl Wonder demonstrates the increasingly shaky grasp with Robin's official owners have on the character -- unofficial claims on the character, if truer to the spirit of all that Robin embodies, have begun to override the conservatism of the copyrighted version.

Another, longer, piece of writing which I contributed to Girl-Wonder.org, the essay "*A lot like Robin if you close your eyes*": *Displacement of meaning in the Post-Modern Age*, can be found at the end of this book.

One of the most clearly evident evolutions from Robin to a later alternate figure can be found in the comics work of Frank Miller. Miller was both writer and artist on the 1986 comic *The Dark Knight Returns* and consequently the creator of that story's Robin, Carrie Kelley.

A decade later, Miller was in the midst of creative his over-the-top hardboiled noir series *Sin City* for Dark Horse Comics.

1996's *Sin City* story was entitled *That Yellow Bastard* and centers around the relationships between the three characters: Hartigan, a weathered police officer ready for retirement; the psychopathic Roark; and Nancy, the young girl Hartigan has to save from Roark.

The progression from Carrie to Nancy is clearest when *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, Frank Miller's 2001 sequel to *The Dark Knight Returns*, is added to the mix of comparisons as well. Miller's decision to revisit themes and images from 'That Yellow Bastard' demonstrates how closely the two stories are aligned, and also reveals parallels between Roark and Dick Grayson.

The Carrie of *Returns* and the Nancy of the first chapter of *Yellow Bastard* are both adolescent girls who don't respect their parents, and both sneak out and clamber down their fire escapes in order to go hang out with a grizzled old crime fighter -- Bruce Wayne and John Hartigan, respectively.

In *Returns*, the shadow of a window frame paints a cross shape across Bruce's face; in *Sin City* Miller simply gives Hartigan a scar in the same position on his forehead as Bruce's cross.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Carrie and Bruce's relationship is an oddly sweet one in the midst of darkness and despair, with Miller himself describing it as "a father and his little girl". In *That Yellow Bastard*, Hartigan calls Nancy "the daughter I never had". Years pass for each pair. Nancy and Carrie both grow up - Carrie to sixteen, Nancy to nineteen. Carrie becomes Cat Girl, a curvaceous, pouty-lipped vigilante. Nancy's become a stripper, even more curvy and full-lipped than Carrie. Both have white hair and pointed, elfin chins.

Nancy confesses to Hartigan that she has been in love with him

for years. Hartigan calls Nancy "the love of my life", though he also objects that "there's wrong and there's wrong and then there's this!".

When Carrie thinks that she is dying, her last words to Batman are "I love you". Batman rescues her, and confirms that he loves her in return. The final page of 'The Dark Knight Strikes Again' is a silhouette of the pair of them, Carrie and Bruce, gazing at one another. Bruce calls her "Darling".

While Carrie and Bruce never exchange a deep on-panel kiss, as Nancy and Hartigan do, it is clear that Miller intends the nature of the two relationships to match: there's wrong, and there's wrong, and then there's this. But why is it wrong? Certainly Carrie is decades younger than Bruce, but she herself asserts that she is "hardly a child". She's abandoned her gender-ambiguous Robin -- once upon a time, the Gotham media dubbed her "The Boy Wonder" -- and has become the distinctly female Cat Girl. When Bruce calls her Robin, she testily corrects his error.

But the memory of Robin remains, and in Miller's oftentimes homophobic writing this memory of Robin can be seen as a taint and pollution on the romance. As a way out of this situation, Miller sets out to kill off Robin as thoroughly as possible, leaving behind a wholly female, wholly heterosexual, wholly sexualised Carrie/Nancy/Cat Girl figure.

In *That Yellow Bastard*, Nancy and Hartigan first meet when he saves her from a perverted murderous madman named Roark. Hartigan leaves Roark mutilated and broken, but science and medicine rebuild him and he returns to torture and brutalize Nancy and, ultimately, is killed violently by Hartigan.

The villain of 'The Dark Knight Strikes Again' appears to be the Joker, who was killed in *The Dark Knight Returns* and whom Miller described as "a homophobic nightmare". The final confrontation in *Strikes Again* reveals that this villain is actually Dick Grayson.

Dressed in his Robin uniform, Dick captures and begins to torture and brutalize Carrie, telling her that he is going to skin her alive. He explains to Bruce that radical gene therapy has meant that anything cut off him will grow back -- just as Roark grew a new penis in *Yellow Bastard*.

Before beginning their final battle, Bruce and Dick trade clearance codes for the Cave's self-destruct mechanism: "Zap. Biff. Pow." and "Kitt. Newmar. Craig." -- the first is comprised of the sound-effect cards from the 1960s Batman TV show, the second is the surnames of the actresses who played Catwoman. By summoning the memories of this show and associating them with this Robin character, Miller is setting the scene for a double eradication of the parts of Batman which make his romance with Carrie problematic.

During the following fight, Batman uses the following nicknames -- which, in this context, become homophobic slurs -- for Dick: Bunky, Dickster, Bobbin, Dondi, Button, Boy, Plum. He then tells Dick that he intends to drop him into a volcano as a method of execution. The following dialog exchange takes place:

Dick: DAMN you! I LOVED you!

Bruce: So WHAT? You were USELESS. You didn't have the CHOPS. You couldn't CUT THE MUSTARD.

Dick: I LOVED you! I would've done ANYTHING for you!

Bruce: You're breaking my HEART.

Bruce throws Dick into the volcano with the final farewell of "So long, Boy Wonder". The legacies casting their shadow over Bruce and Carrie being a couple have been summoned and destroyed; the 'Boy Wonder' is gone completely.

Only, of course, it's not: Robin is so much bigger and less controllable than Frank Miller would like to think.

The 2004 animated film *The Incredibles* by Pixar studios features a would-be sidekick, grown bitter and vengeful following rejection. This character, named Syndrome, shares striking similarities with Miller's vanquished queer Dick. Like Dick in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, Syndrome's villainy grows out of an unfulfilled wish to fight at his beloved hero's side. Both characters can be read as a threat not because they present a physical challenge for the burly vigilantes they're up against -- both Dick and Syndrome are buffoons, rather than truly menacing -- but because their very existence suggests an alternative to the heterosexual family units the heroes seek to save.

Peter Conrad, a writer for UK newspaper *The Guardian*, has remarked that the significant ideological problem in *The Incredibles* is that "there's a huge difference between respecting difference, and instructing the weak to honor the inherent superiority of the great". Superhero movies in the decade of *The Incredibles* played heavily with the idea of the superhero as an outsider with a secret their family can't understand, with the X-Men sequel *X2* going as far as having a blatantly allegorical 'coming out' scene in which a young superhero exposes his

otherness to his 'normal', hegemonic family. *The Incredibles* undermines this idea; its heroes are special because they are particularly good at being a traditional family unit, and Syndrome's villainy arises out of his inability to see that this family unit is worthier than his sidekick identification.

The Incredibles also echoes Miller in its use of Objectivist philosophy, popularised by the author Ayn Rand. Sidekick figures in general can be read as antithetical to Rand's ideas, with writer Wendy McElroy's review of *The Incredibles* suggesting that "Syndrome is a classic example of the 'second-hander' Rand describes so well in her novel *The Fountainhead* — a person who lives through the opinions of others rather than his own accomplishments." Another reviewer, David Sterritt, quotes Mikita Brottman, professor of language and literature at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, on the subject of the film:

"The movie salutes Superman," Dr. Brottman adds. "Not the 'superman' in comic books but the one [despots] believe in. Its idea seems to be that even in a democracy some people are 'more equal' than others, and the rest of us shouldn't be so presumptuous as to get in their way."

Miller's fascination with objectivism has infused his superhero work for many years; in the book *Eisner/Miller* he speaks of a long-held desire to resurrect the Randian superhero Mr A from disuse. Fascist imagery runs rife in the *Dark Knight* books, with signifiers falling scattershot amongst heroes and villains alike.

Columnist Peter Sanderson, writing in the column *Comics in Context*, finds similarities between Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* universe and another, explaining that Miller's version of Batman and Dick Grayson's first meeting reminds him "of Alan Moore

and David Lloyd's V for Vendetta, in which the masked vigilante V, who is himself a variation on the same archetype as Batman, has chosen the young woman Evie to be his apprentice and eventual successor. He therefore forces her to undergo a recreation of the circumstances of his own origin: not knowing that her captor is V, Evie is imprisoned, has her head shaved, and experiences psychological torture."

Evie is a character very much created in the Robin tradition, a malleable young person who can be recruited to the vigilante crusade. In the film version of *V for Vendetta*, the role of Evie was played by actress Natalie Portman, whose previous roles lent a weight of Umberto Eco's "already said" to her performance. *Vanity Fair* contributing editor Michael Wolff offered that

"Beyond the masked superhero (played by Hugo Weaving), Natalie Portman is the star of V for Vendetta. She's the dialectical tour de force. The Wachowskis, directly descended from the George Lucas school of epic-special-effects mythmaking (nothing if not fetishistic), have pointedly chosen as their damsel in distress Queen Amidala.

But not only. Because in V for Vendetta Portman eerily, campily, perhaps heretically manages to combine her role as pre-adolescent fantasy and comic-book superhero royalty from a galaxy far, far away with the stage role that made her famous: the most notable and authentic political character of the 20th century, Anne Frank.

Portman is the porcelain doll, the Star Wars figurine, the stick-figure girl, with cartoon bubbles over her head — "Help! Help!" "Save me!" And, in the same movie, she's the

girl whose head is shaved, who's curled in a fetal position on the floor of a jail cell."

The film version of *V for Vendetta* is markedly and pointedly a parable about the broken state of the world during the years of George W Bush's American presidency and Tony Blair's time as Britain's Prime Minister. *The Incredibles* was released a week after Bush's second term as President began, and was seen by many commentators as exemplifying the conservatism of the status quo under his leadership. Both Syndrome and Portman's Evie stand as disruptors of that conservatism, and it's only the politics of their respective texts which make one a villain and the other a hero.

One of the darkest appropriations of the Robin figure is Jeff Lindsay's *Dexter* crime novel series, which feature a sociopathic protagonist who disposes of the other killers he encounters.

Despite being a mentally ill serial murderer himself, the fact that Dexter's victims are malevolent gives him a tenuous connection to the vigilante/avenger hero trope. Both the books themselves and fan-groups familiar with the mythologies of Robin and Batman capitalise on this parallel, demonstrating an extreme of the ways in which the scope available to Robin within popular culture is significantly broader and deeper than 'official' texts featuring the character would suggest.

Dexter describes, in his internal monologue, the education his disillusioned foster father – a police officer -- gave him as turning him from “an aimless child with a random urge to kill into a caped avenger”. Despite feeling little to no emotion toward other people, Dexter maintains a girlfriend in order to appear normal: “Rita was my cape, red tights, and utility belt—almost the entire costume.”

The costume Dexter is here describing sounds, to the casual reader, like a generic superhero costume – tights, cape, gadgets – but is, in fact, the costume worn by the most recent cartoon version of Robin prior to the 2001-2005 publication of the *Dexter* novels; neither Batman nor Superman wear red tights, this Robin did.

When Dexter and Rita attend a costume party, Rita dresses as Peter Pan and Dexter “was Zorro, of course; the Dark Avenger with a ready blade.” Each costume contains mythic resonance for the Batman and Robin-savvy reader: Rita, Dexter’s unknowing enabler, chooses one of Robin’s most significant forebears, while Dexter opts for the character who served as Batman’s inspiration both within the comic and the comics industry. Dexter likens helping the police with an investigation to being “a valuable member of the Justice League”, the team on which Batman serves.

When the *Dexter* novels were adapted into a Showtime series for American cable television in 2006, the program prompted commentary and creative output from a number of comics-aware groups. Comics artist/storyteller Tim Sale, responsible for a number of the strongest recent Batman stories, remarked on *Dexter*’s similarities to the Dark Knight on his official messageboard:

“It has a remarkably intelligent take on a crime fighting vigilante who is emotionally stunted and yet interacts and cares for people in the civilian world. Dexter is deeply psychotic, but...

...sound familiar?

The show is dark and witty and fun and gruesome and has a noirish voice over narration and not only reminded me of Batman, but *Batman Year One* in particular. [...] I was struck by how well a TV show managed to find just the

right tone and pace and attitude for a Batman movie, when so many Batman movies have fcuked [sic] it up so often.”

The connections linking Dexter to Robin are stronger than those tying him to Batman, however. One of the dissimilarities between Dexter and Batman is that Batman is self-made, having created his secret persona without the kind of direct guidance he later provides Robin with. Dexter, by contrast, is shaped into the vigilante he is through tutelage highly reminiscent of Robin's own.

Like any self-respecting superhero, Dexter harks back to his 'origin story' on a regular basis, and Dexter's beginnings are as a boy, and then an adolescent, being put through a long training period by his mentor and foster father. In one such training scene in the television adaptation, Dexter's father attempts to quell a teenaged Dexter's impatient bloodthirstiness by admonishing that “this isn't a game”. In the novels, this same chastisement is offered by Deborah, Dexter's foster sister.

“This isn't a game” is a heavily repeated theme in the *Batman* comics, where it can be found directed at each of the Robins at some point during their tenure in the role. One pivotal scene in 2004's *War Games* Batman storyline centered around the imprisoned Stephanie Brown crying the line as she landed a punch on her torturer and eventual murderer.

Dexter himself seems more than content with Robin as his allusory avatar of choice: “Yes, me; ditzzy Dexter, trying to be Boy Wonder.”

Some fans of the third Robin, Tim Drake, were particularly drawn to Dexter, citing the fact that Dexter embodied many of the more disturbing traits which had been excised from Tim in the quest by DC Comics to, as writer Mark Waid put it, “fix Batman” and the world of Gotham. Fans who were interested in

the potentially sociopathic traits exhibited by Tim – such as that offered in a series of 'potential future' storylines, in which Tim himself became a serial killer – were being forced to find an alternate site of expression within popular culture, and *Dexter* provided it. Fan comments included:

"He's perfect for refugees from DC fandom especially, I think."

And

"Let's just say that all sorts of the Tim-fangirls reading this would probably find Dexter quite... quite. *koff*"

And

"If you've ever read a comic with, say, the third Robin (Mr. Timothy Drake himself) in it and thought to yourself: 'hmm, that is one scary ~~midget~~ teenager. I bet he's gonna grow up to be a supervillain', WHILE ALSO thinking he's the cutest thing in all creation, then you need to watch this show."

Soon after this niche of the Robin fandom discovered the show, fanfiction writers began crafting stories in which Dexter, rather than being trained by his foster father to be a serial killer, was taken on by Batman and raised to be Robin. Stories featured exchanges such as:

"That will be all, Robin."

The teenager stared at him. Batman pinched the kidnapper's neck, rendering the man unconscious.

"Stand down, Dexter."

And

"[Batman] does not, of course, *condone* killing, but the Grayson boy is determined to have vengeance for his

parents. And... had it been Dexter, Zucco would already be dead. At least this Robin is asking permission."

The official avenue for those wishing to explore the intersection of vigilantism/superhero motifs and severe personality disorders through Robin had been closed, but subversive reader/creators simply reopened it via the new, closely associated, figure of Dexter.

When the Batman TV show debuted in 1966, a 'cocktail and frug' party was thrown in a New York discotheque to launch it. Andy Warhol was there, and the walls were adorned with drawings of Batman bearing labels which declared the pictures 'Authentic Pop Art'. This bid to be part of the hip scene failed dismally, though - the audience saved their cheers for the commercial for Corn Flakes shown during a break in the program.

There's an episode of the cartoon *The Simpsons* in which the town of Springfield is overrun with giant monsters broken free of advertising billboards. Lisa Simpson helps write a jingle designed to defeat the monsters: "Just don't watch, just don't watch." In another Simpsons episode, Homer Simpson writes another song - the Simpsons often breaks into musical interlude, taking full advantage of the narrative freedoms which come with its arch, camp-like tone - and this song includes the incomplete lyric "something, something... Burt Ward." The song's a hit, Home has his fifteen minutes of fame, and then everything goes back to just as it was before. Even with a catchy turn, pop culture's shelf life is not, typically, very long.

But the way *The Simpsons* continuously references and parodies the iconography and figures associated with the 1960s Batman show is one of the clearest pieces of evidence that the program,

and by extension Robin and Batman, still keep cultural worth and, far more importantly, are part of the folk stories and myths of the pop culture which come after.

The Simpsons knows the precarious nature of pop - don't watch it, and it goes away, no matter how giant it may seem. And even by this harsh standard, the Simpsons finds Batman and Robin to be of lasting importance. An endlessly referential and endlessly inventive pop text itself, *The Simpsons* is the first of the post-Robin texts which demonstrates the impact Robin has had on entertainment and culture examined by this chapter.

Within the world of the Simpsons, the superhero Radioactive Man has a history which parallels the real-world one of Batman: a near-incoherent and ideology-sodden film serial in the 1940s, a high-camp mid-century television show, a late-century film which wants to move away from the earlier chipper tone, and the ever-present hum of the comics themselves somewhere in the background.

Batman, if he is to span so many different incarnations, must have a Robin, and so Radioactive Man has Fallout Boy. Robin's 'Holy!' puns become the equally silly 'Jiminy Jillickers!'.

Just as the actor most associated with Robin is Burt Ward, Fallout Boy's aging actor counterpart is a character named Buddy Hodges. One Simpsons episode included a scene set at a holiday retreat for gay men; Buddy was one of the guests. Queerness and Robin - even a Robin two steps removed - continue to go hand in hand.

The Simpsons, encompassing as it does the satirical, the absurd, and the downright anarchic, not only has its own Batman equivalent, it has Batman as well. Blithely ignoring the

dissonance such a situation creates - "Oh, Bart," Lisa says breezily in one episode. "Cartoons don't have to be realistic." - the show makes it clear time and time again that the Simpsons are a family who exist in a world where Batman is part of the common language.

One of the funniest and strangest Batman-Simpsons crossover moments occurs in an episode of the latter which features Adam West voicing a cartoon version of himself. In the first episode of the 1960s Batman show, Batman - played by West - performed an awkward disco dance called the Batusi, which became a short-lived craze after the episode aired. During West's Simpsons guest-slot, the Batusi was once again performed on prime-time TV. What had once been a piece of strange, seemingly disposable television was now recycled by another generation's version of this same type of entertainment.

Arguably the most significant nod to the Batman show of the 1960s made by the Simpsons is the borrowed device of having characters walk sideways up a wall as a signifier of rope-climbing. In referencing this particular image, the Simpsons becomes a high-tech cartoon program playing at being a low-tech live-action show. It's an image of suspension, of in-between-ness, but a very specific and complex one: both parody and parodied, homage and reappropriation. The original walking-up-walls scenes in the Batman show functioned in a similar way to much of the comedy of *The Simpsons* – guest stars from other shows or the real world would poke their heads out a window as Batman and Robin walked past. All narrative logic went up in smoke, leaving only the anarchic spirit of carnivale or pop.

Robin may be gone, but there are those who have come after who remember the importance of walking up walls.

In early 2005, the We Are Family Foundation (WAFF), a United States based organization promoting social cohesion, compiled a music video featuring popular cartoon characters miming along to the Foundation's namesake tune, "to help teach children the values of co-operation and unity". One of the cartoons utilized for the video was SpongeBob SquarePants, a Nickelodeon character who lives in an underwater town and is aimed at the two-year-old to eleven-year-old demographic.

Backlash against the video, and SpongeBob, became the media's quirky flavor of the month. A spokesperson for the conservative Focus on the Family group told the *New York Times* that the WAFF video was "an insidious means by which the organization is manipulating and potentially brainwashing kids" into tolerating gay and queer lifestyles - SpongeBob and his best friend, a pink starfish named Patrick, were attacked as being unsuitable role models for children based on this reasoning.

SpongeBob Squarepants, as a TV show, is in many respects the most direct heir of the Batman show of the 1960s. Both programs are double-pronged, simultaneously appealing as a straightforward story for kids and a camp romp for knowing adults. The WAFF controversy brought SpongeBob's following among queer audiences into the limelight; BBC news reported that gay men were "snapping up branded toys, lunch boxes and even thongs" bearing likenesses of the show's characters.

The Valentine's Day edition of the *New Yorker* in 2005 included a cartoon by Lee Lorenz depicting SpongeBob and Patrick opening their mail, looking touched by what they find in one of the envelopes. The caption reads "It's a very sweet note from Batman and Robin", which encapsulates all the ways in which

SpongeBob and Patrick are the new face of a folk tradition once fronted by Batman and Robin: gay allegations, camp address to viewers, multi-generational audiences, sophisticated reappropriation for satire by high-brow pop media.

But SpongeBob also taps into older traditions which were once embodied by Robin and so is now the avatar of those concepts Robin can no longer contain, as evidenced by an analysis of the SpongeBob Squarepants movie in the feminist magazine *Bitch*:

"More important than SpongeBob's sexual proclivities is the film's explicit discussions of the difference between boys and men... the film hilariously pokes fun at the archetypal rendering of this rite of passage, and actually makes boyhood look more complicated, more empathetic, more flexible than the forms of manhood modeled by the adults in the story... SpongeBob and Patrick know that manhood is just a bad combination of confidence, bullshit, humiliation, and Viagra; rather than acquiesce, the two friends set out to make fun of it while representing boyhood as a kind of in-between space free of the performance anxiety and anger that orbit the adult male and fuel his fear of failure."

This suggestion that boyhood is an "in-between space" is echoed by academics who have studied the figure of the tomboy in movies and fiction. Yvonne Tasker's book *Working Girls* explains that

"Like both 'working girls' or 'bad girls', the image of the 'tomboy' captures a sense of immaturity -- of both a freedom from the responsibilities of adult life and a sense of incomplete development. A mapping of transgression that can be contained, the tomboy signals a composite of

experience and innocence -- of capabilities and energies together with sexual naivete. Or rather she is a sexually ambiguous figure. Her ambiguous state allows the tomboy to accompany the hero on travels, even to drive the bus. She is a kind of cross-dresser, discreetly, rather an excessively muscular in her proletarian male guise."

An example of a tomboy figure from the same era as Robin's early depictions is Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Rebecca and Robin share the visual symbol of a capital R emblazoned on their clothing. The book *Sexual Visuality from Literature to Film* by Dennis Denisoff says of Rebecca that "her very initial, we are told, was 'alive' and 'full of force'", going on to argue that the central subject explored by 'Rebecca' is "the punishment endured by any person regardless of sex who retains an identification with boyishness to the detriment of adult gendering and a traditional heterosexual life narrative."

Another group of figures in modern popular culture who eschew traditional adult gendering and traditional heterosexual life narratives are the characters of the BBC show *Doctor Who*, and while depictions of Robin have narrowed and succumbed to conservatism, *Doctor Who* has maintained and enhanced its potentiality for queer readings. It can be argued that *Doctor Who*'s place in British pop culture is directly equivalent to that of the comic-book superhero in the United States: when the television show *Queer as Folk* was adapted from an English program into an American one, a character's obsession with *Doctor Who* was translated into a deep love of superhero comics for the character's US counterpart.

One of the human companion characters on *Doctor Who* --the sidekick-type role which, like Robin, has been taken up by a variety of characters throughout the history lead hero's

adventures -- appearing on the program in the early 1980s, carried numerous cultural signifiers in common with Robin. Adric, played by Matthew Waterhouse, was a young dark-haired orphan taken in by the Doctor. His costume consisted of a tunic, undershirt, pants and boots, all in the colours red, yellow, and green.

Like Robin often is, Adric was and is hated by much of the *Doctor Who* fanbase and, like Robin, Adric fell prey to the ancient trope of the death of the young hero. While not envisaged as the character's fate from the outset, but rather a decision later arrived at (just as it was in the case of the murdered Robins, Jason and Stephanie), Adric's death nevertheless seems inevitable when one reads the original character outline written in 1980 by creator Chris Bidmead:

Adric is fifteen, small for his age, wiry and strong, with short, straight black hair... Adric learned to lie and steal, activities which are the dark side of his natural optimistic brashness and enormous intellectual curiosity.

Adric never fitted into the gang he was pressed into by his brother, partly because of his superior education, and partly because he is a born non-conformist, even among outlaws. When he met the Doctor his strong sense of self-preservation prompted him to assume an air of subdued innocence and false naivete. Though a disguise, this impersonation reminds us of Adric's very real vulnerability as a mortal...

The after-death appearances of Adric also strongly echo conventions found in Robin's usage -- like Jason Todd or Stephanie Brown, numerous contradicting versions of the demised figure later appear as phantoms, resurrections and

visions, each appearance contradicting the others but somehow all of them remaining equally "true" despite their contradictions. The core story is the story of the young dead ally; all variations on this core tale are seemingly accepted as equally valid variants by the audience.

Journalist Ed Hagan of the UK news hub The Guardian summed up why *Doctor Who* appealed to gay audiences:

"In its early years, the character of the Doctor was established as an innocent in ways of human love and prejudice, happy to befriend anyone as long as they were good people.

He was never cruel or cowardly, and never a bully. Most of the bad guys, especially the dreaded Daleks, were conformist, stamping all over the galaxy trying to eradicate things that were different - and in the case of the Cybermen, make people exactly like them.

The Doctor, standing up for the persecuted and the oppressed, is an attractive figure for a young person growing up and feeling a little different from everyone else. He's always been a little bit anti-establishment too; unlike *Star Trek*, the Doctor would be more likely to topple a Federation than endorse it.

Then there are the Doctor's companions, not only highly crush-worthy, but gay icons in their own right. Ready to rise to the occasion, dressed in clothes that will date in about five seconds, and always with a sharp tongue to throw this week's monster off their stride.

In recent years, after the success of the 2005 revival, there

has been a much more tangible gay presence in the show. Out with the glitzy, camp costumes (space pirates in eyeshadow, anyone?) and shaky sets of old - in with a classier look and actual gay characters and themes."

Russell T Davies, creator of *Queer as Folk*, helmed the 2005 revival of *Doctor Who*. The new version of *Doctor Who* introduced the character Captain Jack Harkness, who was the first openly and overtly queer character on the program. Jack, like Adric, was one of the Doctor's companions. In the 2005 season finale, Jack did what Robin may well never do, and kissed the primary hero of the text, on-screen and on the lips.

Jack went on to become the lead character of a *Doctor Who* spin-off, *Torchwood*, much as Robin graduated from the *Batman* title to *Robin*. Just as *Robin* introduced Stephanie to be a foil, offsider and love interest for Tim -- Robin's Robin -- *Torchwood* introduced the character Ianto Jones. Ianto was originally envisaged as "the Alfred to Jack's Batman", according to the *Torchwood* magazine, but as the series went on and a romantic dynamic began to evolve between the two characters. The dark-haired, blue-eyed Ianto, already quite Robin-like in looks, underwent a costume change from dowdy suits to, as the show's costumer explained in *Torchwood* magazine, "something much sharper": a bright red shirt. Jack and Ianto -- a hero and his right-hand man -- are now an openly queer, openly coupled pair of covert world-savers on the program, two Robins at the helm of their own story, armed with an amnesia drug named, in a nod to the history of their archetypes, Retcon.

Rapper Eminem's third solo album, *The Eminem Show*, equated the figure of Robin with ideas of the trickster, soldier, escapist hero and laughing, trouble making daredevil. Eminem is known for switching through numerous identities on his songs:

Marshall Mathers, his real name; Slim Shady, his darker and more violent alter ego; Eminem, the emcee overseeing the others. On *The Eminem Show*, all these take up facets of Robin as new parts of who they are, and in doing so become the new versions of the folkloric roles Robin can no longer easily be. In addition, Eminem gave Robin a new role to play: the mouthpiece of young America's rage.

The Eminem Show makes it clear from the outset that the world in which it was written, the world of the early 21st century, is one which direly needs a Robin. "Look at all the bullshit that goes on in Gotham when I'm gone," Eminem laments in 'Business', while 'Without Me' states that "it feels so empty without me" before breaking into a bratty sing-song version of the 1960s Batman TV theme.

The 'Without Me' music video features Eminem dressed in the traditional Robin costume, negotiating a television screen-space which has been divided into comic-book-style panels. The more long-established rapper Dr Dre takes the role of Batman and the pair of them create trouble and mayhem in a series of scenes. Academic Gianni Sibilla describes the video as "portraying Eminem as a controversy-maker, someone who's able to say what he thinks, and therefore someone who is necessary in our hypocritical society."

While Eminem is a perfect fit as the new avatar for Robin's trickster aspects, other elements are less easily transferred to their new home. Eminem has a long and extremely public history of vitriolic anti-queer sentiment. As music reviewer Alan Haworth put it, "What are we to make of this homophobe wearing Robin's costume?"

Academic James Keller sees Eminem's lyrics as revealing "a

clamorous and voracious adolescent sexuality that proclaims to the world its conformity to gender norms by reviling homosexual practice. Thus, whether or not he consciously hates gay men, he has certainly demonized queer sexuality, designating it as the humorous and sometimes hateful unthinkable." The high-camp tone automatically carried with any and all references to the 1960s Batman TV show can, if viewed within a particularly brittle cynicism, be seen as fitting into this attitude.

A variety of Robin-inspired personas are present on 'The Eminem Show' -- a young urban 'soldier' of some songs is a match for the grim, driven Robin of contemporary comics, but unlike the Robin of the comics this more serious character co-exists comfortably alongside a Robin who will begin a song by exclaiming "Holy whack unlyrical lyrics!" and walk sideways up the side of a building, à la Burt Ward, in the 'Without Me' video. This embracing of incoherence plants Eminem firmly within the carnivalesque, like Robin before him.

Anthony Decurtis, a writer for *Rolling Stone* magazine, articulates the contradictory figure of Eminem like this:

"Eminem and his handlers want to have it both ways: on the one hand, we are supposed to understand his lyrics as emanating from his deep-seated emotions and dismal life experiences, and are therefore justified. But on the other hand, we are supposed to read his performances as parody, theatre, or deliberate provocations to his critics and not take them seriously: the kids 'get the joke', so why can't we?"

Cultural commentator Cynthia Fuchs argues this two-sided nature of Eminem's person is in itself a deliberate evocation of

Robin - an observation which underlines the notion that Eminem is, in fact, better at embodying this figure than the figure itself has become able to:

"Look more closely and see that Eminem's performance is less social and psychological than it is political and abstract. The most dynamic dynamic on the album is the usual one, between Em and himself, creator and creation. It is a dynamic that is frequently explored in comic books, and these form the album's central image. Comics bring a long history of manifesting cultural anxieties, both self-love and self-loathing. He's bopping, he's Robin, he's loyal as a Rap Boy can be to his Dre."

Another rap artist given a start in the industry by Dr Dre is The Lady of Rage. She plays the sidekick to Snoop Dogg's caped crusader and RBX's Commissioner Gordon on the track 'Batman and Robin'. Once again, the Robin chosen as the most accessible for cultural poaching is that of the 1960s show, and the track makes use of both the show's theme song and 'Holy!' language play. The Lady of Rage's given name is Robin, and this - coupled with Snoop and RBX's acceptance of her in the role - underlines the way this Robin, unbound from the constraints of DC Comics ownership, can just as easily be a girl as a boy.

Beyond the rap genre are numerous other music-based heirs to elements of Robin's multifaceted legacy. Two of the most interesting cases are the bands Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance.

Fall Out Boy, named for the *Simpsons* character that pastiched Robin, is made up of four men from Chicago. The frontman of the group, bassist Pete Wentz, is a small dark-haired androgyne who gained notoriety with gossip columnists for his public

displays of non-binary sexuality -- kissing both women and men at night-club events -- and a tendency to engage in quasi-cross dressing through the wearing of "girl jeans" and eye makeup. Photoshoots in NME dressed the band as four caped Boy Wonders, with F.O.B as the letters scrawled on their shirts. Wentz's utilization of the same potent mythic iconographies found in Robin goes well beyond his fashion sense, however: then in his mid-twenties, he played the dual identities of an awkward teenager and smooth performer in the music video for "Dance, Dance", a detective in "Saturday", and a vampire in "A Little Less Sixteen Candles, A Little More Touch Me"; the last of these videos also featured the band as a group of vigilantes who drive around in a black car emblazoned with a bat silhouette on its hood.

My Chemical Romance, a punk quintet from New Jersey, are another route by which the transgressive traits once a possibility for Robin are now appearing in the arena of rock. For the album *Three Cheers For Sweet Revenge*, the band's aesthetic involved on-stage makeup designed to echo the shape of a domino mask, sometimes worn by all members but usually restricted to frontman Gerard Way. Way and rhythm guitarist Frank Iero have been known to exchange extravagant kisses onstage if they feel that the crowd has homophobes in it, as they feel it can be the role of icons to be figureheads for tolerance. Way has also stated in interviews that he understands the context from which fans decide to write erotic fanfiction about himself and Iero; he thereby permits a queer reading on the relationship between himself and his bandmate even though they are each married to a woman. Unlike the people behind the lawsuits against McQuain and Chamberlain, Gerard Way seems to grasp the idea that opening your text to the needs of queer audiences doesn't somehow taint said text's other potential meanings.

Way did an internship at DC Comics during his time at art school, following an adolescence spent adoring comics, and later became the author of the Dark Horse Comics quasi-superhero title *The Umbrella Academy*, which centres on a group of now-adult former child heroes and the damage a youth spent in a mask and uniform has done to each of their psyches. Some survived their tenure, some did not. Some are boys and some are girls, some become villains and some remain heroes. *The Umbrella Academy* elegantly explores all the potentials of the child-superhero story in its ongoing series of limited runs, and Way was awarded an Eisner in 2008 for his work.

One 2008 DC comic contained a scene set inside the bedroom of one of Stephanie Brown's friends. A My Chemical Romance poster is visible on the wall above the desk. Several months later, My Chemical Romance's bassist -- and Gerard Way's brother -- Mikey Way contributed the Batman story for DC's 2008 Halloween special. Robin's official texts have life in them yet, provided enough interesting imaginations infiltrate the stifling ranks.

What's in store for Robin next is anyone's guess. As I said at the beginning of this book, there's a distinct possibility that a new Robin, Damian, will soon take up the role. Some of the old Robins may die, and some of them might then come back. Though a slim possibility exists that DC Comics will, in future, become more adventurous with sexuality and gender for their characters, this seems to be unlikely to occur any time in the immediate future. Despite this, it's unlikely that Robin's power as a figure in wider pop culture will diminish any time soon and, even when it does, there will be many new figures to take up the task of representing the archetypes of Robin once Robin has faded from view.

Mary Borsellino
March 2009

APPENDIX:

“A lot like Robin if you close your eyes.”

Displacement of meaning in the Post-Modern Age

By Mary Borsellino

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Dear Batman,

You are cute but I am in love with Robin. I like to dress up like Robin. I put on my leotards, then my bathing suit, a towel and my pajama top. My towel looks like a cape.

I look a lot like Robin if you close your eyes.

Love,
Stephanie G.
Malden, Mass. 1

Television and sequential art are two media where the image is intrinsic to conveying the intended meaning. Lunch-pails and action figures and movie rights all rely on a brand remaining static, and in Robin's case this has come to mean remaining within an increasingly narrow space of depiction.

But, as Stephanie G put it, there are other ways of seeing Robin, if you close your eyes. The things which a Robin-like figure can contain, but which are cut off from being embodied by Robin himself, lose none of their importance simply because they are rejected by a restrictive, corporate-controlled status quo.

Looking with one's eyes closed can also be a useful critical tool. It's worth inspecting what was excised from Robin, and charting where these elements instead found articulation: in those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; non-White people; young single parents; and HIV positive people. And, especially, girls and women.

The Golden Age of comics, particularly in relation to DC Comics, is typically defined as beginning in the late 1930s with the publication of *Action Comics* #1, the first Superman story. Batman followed a year later, and Robin a year after that. The Golden Age was the era of World War II and of huge popularity for comics. The stories presented demonstrated all the anarchy, messiness and joy of a creative medium discovering its potential. Following Robin's lead, kid sidekicks turned up in droves. Captain America had Bucky, the Human Torch had Toro, the Sandman had Sandy the Golden Boy, and Green Arrow had Speedy.

Green Arrow's creation as a whole earned few points for originality. A playboy millionaire by day, urban vigilante by night, he drove the "Arrowcar" or "Arrowplane" and could be summoned by projecting the "Arrow-signal" into the sky. The only thing saving the character from copyright infringement lawsuits was the fact that he, like Batman, was owned by DC Comics.

The end of the Golden Age is a matter of contention, with some commentators placing it circa 1954, tied to the publication of Dr Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, when sales dropped by 75% 2. Others place the shift into the Silver Age as occurring in the early 1960s with the advent of Marvel's iconic but humanly flawed heroes 3.

The Silver Age was a period of downward sliding for Batman and Robin -- in comic books, at least. The energy earlier storylines had been sustained by was replaced by an uneven tone and dull plots. The 1966 television show created a separate and enduring legacy for the characters during this same time, but it was a legacy the comic's creators chafed against.

By the end of the decade Robin had been removed from Gotham City in order to get Batman back to what writer Denny O'Neil described as the character's roots, in which the Caped Crusader was a "vengeful obsessive-compulsive." 4

Robin's adventures over the next decade took place at Hudson University, where he sometimes worked as an aide to the politically aspirant Barbara Gordon. Barbara's "liberal record" 5 eventually damaged her future as a senator, and Dick Grayson's own ideological affiliations were faring no better with the character lamenting that "both the radical left and the reactionary right consider me an enemy." 6

Dick's problem was part of DC's larger dilemma. Compared to Marvel's hip new breed of heroes, DC was "trying to shake off its own unquestioned irrelevancy." 7 The heroes were treated by their keepers as too iconic, too static, to change with the times. Alex Ross' observation that Robin would never die because he was a figure from television 8 is not incorrect so much as too

narrow. Robin couldn't do *anything* new or innovative, lest the established brand be tarnished.

Green Arrow and Speedy, as second-string also-rans of the faded Golden Age, suffered no such constraints. In the same year that Robin went to college, Green Arrow was rebooted into the Robin Hood-style liberal vigilante his archer gimmick lent itself to. He was charged with "shouldering the burden of relevancy" ⁹ which was proving so elusive to characters such as Batman and Robin. Speedy became a heroin addict, and the storyline garnered publicity and a commendation from the Mayor of New York City.

When the Teen Titans, the superhero team which included both Speedy and Robin, tackled the issue of drug awareness, Robin was not present for the storyline. The special issue of the comic had been funded by the cookie company Keebler, and Robin-related cookie items were licensed to Nabisco ¹⁰. Robin's usefulness as a commodity restricted the limits of what could be done with him creatively, and Speedy had begun to claim that space left silent as his own.

The Silver Age's end, I would argue, took place in 1985-86. These years saw the publication of three DC texts which redefined its continuity, characterisation, and context respectively. Marv Wolfman and George Perez's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* eliminated all continuity from prior decades, allowing more frivolous and outlandish plots and concepts to be wiped away in favour of a more dour tone. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* has been described as "the fountainhead and origin of the reversionary superhero narrative" ¹¹, incorporating as it does all the versions of Batman who have come before into a coherent-through-admitted-incoherency singular figure.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* , completing the trio of new-era texts, defined the fledgling Post-Modern Age (this term was suggested to me by feminist media commentator Karen Healey. Others have called it the Iron Age, Bronze Age, or the Difficult Age) through its then-audacious idea that the world of superheroes would quite possibly be a very unsettling place to live. As with the other artistically rich works referenced by this study, to sum the story up as having one particular aspect which impacted on the industry is to reduce the book's myriad strengths and do them a disservice, but for the sake of this discussion a pertinent example of *Watchmen* 's message can be found in the title itself, quoting as it does Juvenal's *Satires* -- "Qui custodiet ipsos custodes (who watches the watchmen?)". In the post- *Watchmen* era, super-men, vigilantes, and caped heroes were no longer automatically trustworthy, with a text best read as a commentary on the genre ending up as part of the template by which the genre was redefined.

It is the first two of these three texts which had the most direct impact on Robin in the early years of the Post-Modern Age. *Crisis* reset the DC universe, allowing for any reinterpretation the characters' owners saw fit to create, while *Dark Knight* began the process of articulating what Robin 'could' and 'could not' be.

Dark Knight 's utilisation of Robin was important in three major ways. First, Robin was *there* . After the banishment of Dick Grayson to college, Robin's place as being outside of the 'true meaning' of Batman had become common opinion; a subsequent sidekick/ward introduced, Jason Todd, had been met with ambivalent fan reaction (letter columns of the time dubbed him a "quiche-eater" 12, then slang for an effeminate male 13). But, in *Dark Knight* , there Robin was, bright and bouncing and impossible to discount. Miller had re-established, and cemented, Robin's place in Batman's mythology, explaining

in later years that he "just loved the contrast between this stocky, tough, dark adult, and a colorful little pixie running around." 14

The second key aspect of Miller's use of Robin was that Robin had become mortal. The threat of such a fate for Robin had certainly been played with in earlier stories, but never before had the death stuck. *Dark Knight* opens with a Bruce Wayne who has long retired his Batman role, and it was Jason's death which prompted him to give up the cape and cowl. The Robin costume hangs empty, suspended mid-air by some invisible method, inside a glass case in the Batcave. Miller gave the bright suit a renewed importance and relevancy within the Batman story, but he also made the children wearing it painfully human.

The third groundbreaking element of Miller's Robin redefinition was the fact that this Robin was a girl. Caroline Keene Kelley, usually called Carrie, is a thirteen-year-old who is good with computers and who spends her pocket money on a Robin costume when Batman returns to active duty. Setting a precedent for the other Post-Modern Age Robins who will follow her, she assumes the role by presenting herself to Batman in-costume and offering 'Robin' as the answer when he asks her name.

Much of the writing on Carrie centres around the ways in which her gender can be read as a commentary and critique on possible queer interpretations of the Batman/Robin partnership 15. While I feel it is vitally important that Miller's troublesome gender and sexuality politics are explored more thoroughly by academics than they have been thus far, this is not my focus in this essay. Rather, I am interested in the ways in which Carrie's

appropriation of the Robin role contributed to the ongoing debate concerning Robin's gender boundaries.

Though she was the first female to take up the name of Robin, Carrie was not the first girl to grasp at a piece of the legacy. Real-world girls, as the 1966 letter beginning this chapter illustrated, have sought in Robin a hero-avatar for themselves just as boys have. When figures such as Bionic Woman and Wonder Woman were on offer, in 1981, preschool girls would appropriate them as play identities *along with* Superman and Batman 16, their desire for idols of like gender secondary to their wish for a diversity of possible roles.

Given such a long history of instances of girls displaying an interest in Batman and in Robin, it is more than slightly absurd that Denny O'Neil, when asked in 1991 about whether those working on the Batman titles considered their female readership, responded with "Wonder Woman appeals to women" 17. If an equivalent remark were made in a world where DC's biggest and brightest were a Super Man, a Wonderwoman and a Batwoman, it would be laughable. To suggest that any and all male readers would be content with a single hero of their gender is preposterous.

'Preposterous' has also been used to describe the character of Betty (sometimes spelled Bette) Kane, Bat-Girl, introduced into *Batman* comics in 1961. Andy Medhurst's 'Batman, Deviance and Camp', the essay describing the character in this way, objects to her on the same grounds as those which give rise to discomfort about Carrie -- that is, the existence of a girl in pointed pixie boots swinging across Gotham's skyline somehow negates any possible Batman/Robin homoeroticism. Considering the endless parade of female characters who have acted as love interests for Bruce Wayne, and Robin's own robust

romantic history, it is remarkable that Robin and Robin-related roles become such a perceived threat when inhabited by girls.

Though calling herself Bat-Girl, it is "pretty clear" who it is that Betty is emulating. 18 Like Robin, her costume is bare-legged (though she opts for a short red skirt rather than the green shorts) and features a green cape and a red mask. Her yellow hair completes the familiar colour ensemble. Later elaborations on the character's history would include that, in her childhood, Betty made herself a Robin costume and played at being him 19. She represents the in-panel/on-paper voice of those real-world girl children who choose the Boy Wonder as their play-selves.

Betty, like the letter-writing Stephanie G. quoted at the start of this chapter, both wants to be Robin and to be near Robin. The puppy-love hijinks her crush gets her and Robin into are the main reason Medhurst reacts to strongly to the character, but vehemence in his argument is also directed to the way that the "shadowy vigilante" Batman became "an upholder of the most stifling small town American values" 20. As Medhurst spends considerable time in his essay outlining the reasons why he cannot possibly take a shadowy vigilante Batman seriously, this is an odd reason to object to Betty.

Medhurst describes the actions of Fredric Wertham's young gay participants as a form of bricolage which has to "undertake a corrupt decoding for the purposes of satisfying marginalized desires" 21, and (rightfully) complains that "homosexuality, for Wertham, is synonymous with misogyny" 22. Yet Medhurst's scathing dismissal of "Bat-Gidget" 23 does not really support the indignation which Wertham's suggestion of misogyny apparently prompts in him.

If Medhurst understands the necessity for one group to gain access to the text for their needs then we should see that this accessibility should be possible for other parties also. His area of focus is the camp and queer readings of Batman, but it's unfortunate that his method of supporting his own area involves discounting any importance or validity Robin's female counterpart might have.

Girls are required to perform their own "corrupt decoding" and bricolage on the majority of Batman texts if they wish to place themselves into the story. Like the little girl searching out a young female face in crowd scenes in order to put herself into a storybook, and her triumphant cry of "there I am!" 24, female children will sometimes create radical reworkings of stories in order to place an avatar on centre stage. Tina, one of the subjects of Anne Haas Dyson's *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy*, does not find a female role to take as her own even in the margins of the Batman texts she is exposed to; she must instead appropriate a minor, non-powerful character from another youth-hero text (the film *3 Ninjas*) and re-write her into someone who can "whip some butt" 25. Tina then tells a story in which the new, improved girl character marries Batman. As with Betty, the desire in Tina's story is to be of equal power to, and romantic partner of, the hero of the story.

One doesn't have to venture as far as Medhurst before encountering a tearing-down of Betty. The comics themselves have characters who will tell her that she is "pathetic" 26, and her appearances are few and often years apart.

To return to the birth of the Post-Modern Age: in the years immediately following *Crisis*, Jason Todd was re-written as a street kid who meets Batman after attempting to steal the tires

off the Batmobile. Though *Dark Knight* was not an in-continuity story, its impact upon the ongoing *Batman* and *Detective Comics* titles was unarguable, and the second Boy Wonder's mortality was high in the minds of creators and audience alike

Jim Starlin became the *Batman* writer in 1987, and quickly began to look for ways to eliminate the Boy Wonder:

At one point DC had this AIDS book they wanted to do. They sent around memos to everybody saying 'What character do you think we should, you know, have him get AIDS and do this dramatic thing' and they never ended up doing this project. I kept sending them things saying 'Oh, do Robin, do Robin!'

27

Starlin and Denny O'Neil -- now *Batman* editor -- began a campaign to make the audience dislike Jason as much as possible, then orchestrated a storyline which left his fate as a cliffhanger. Inviting the audience to phone one of two 1-900 numbers and vote thumbs up or down, their stunt result in Jason dying by a margin of 72 out of over ten thousand calls.

As well as generating negative press all over the world, the gimmick created a status quo which put the creators involved at odds with the owners of the Robin trademark. As Starlin remembers:

So we did this and the book came out, Denny was on all these talk shows across the country that day saying, it's kind of funny because he was taking credit for the whole project. But as soon as the book came out and Robin died, the executives up at DC started going "Whoof!" because they had all these

lunch pails with Robin's picture on it - suddenly it was all my idea again. 28

DC Comics needed a new Robin, and fast, but they had successfully convinced the majority of their audience that they did not want Robin and, in fact, preferred the character dead. They had to create a Robin liked by people who didn't like Robin; a Robin for the Post-Modern Age. Enter Tim Drake.

Before I go any further, I feel it's worth acknowledging that the concerns explored by this essay require me to construct Tim Drake as something of a straw man. He is a character whose interactions with peers, mentors, and foes are themselves worthy of study, and I hope such explorations are undertaken by others in the future. However, I am here interested not in the things Tim Drake is, but rather those things he *isn't* ; the elements of Robin which Robin could no longer contain.

When the story detailing Jason Todd's demise was collected in a trade paperback, it was prefaced by a faux essay on the subject of Robin. One of the footnotes to the work reads, in part, "They were, let us remember, uneducated children." 29

Rumours at the time suggested that Carrie would take up the now-empty role 30, but such an event was most likely prevented from occurring for the same reasons that Robin could not simply be left as dead: those lunch pails needed selling. DC Comics needed a Robin who looked like Dick Grayson and Jason Todd had -- dark hair, white skin, male -- and equally importantly, he had to be obviously distinct from the "uneducated children" which the readers had been coached into disliking. On his first visit to Wayne Manor, Tim gazes around, wide-eyed, before remarking

"Gosh -- you know, I've seen pictures of this place, but it's even bigger and better than I thought.

Oh, my -- there's the Renoir Mr. Wayne bought last year. I read about that in *Art World Today* .

He's got an *Erte* ? Oh, I love his stuff. My dad bought an *Erte* litho last year... But this is a *statue* . Mr. Pennyworth, Dick, please, can I see the *rest* of the house?" 31

When Urricchio and Pearson, in the closing chapter of *The Many Lives of the Batman* , refer to the differences between the "often clearly ethnic" thugs who menace Gotham and the "Graysons, Todds and Drakes, with their blue eyes, firm chins, straight noses, noble brows, and Anglo names" 32, they write without a knowledge of the less immediately evident (but deeply textually ingrained) class distinctions between the Robins.

Denny O'Neil described Jason as "an arrogant little snot" 33 on more than one occasion, citing his rough, slangy speech and abrasive personality as reasons why the character had earned himself such a grim fate. Contrast this disruptive, unruly force with the well-spoken character of Tim. Where Jason was homeless and orphaned, Tim is from a wealthy family -- his father can afford to buy an *Erte* lithograph. And Tim is very much an *educated* child: he reads *Art World Today* .

Tim became Robin in 1990. Very soon after this, other characters began appearing, containing the parts of Robin which this intense, serious, black caped "Little Bat" 34 (Tim's code-name for himself) was not capable of incorporating into his version of the Boy Wonder.

Stephanie Brown was introduced in 1992, a blonde teenage daughter of longtime Batman villain the Cluemaster. Calling herself Spoiler, Stephanie fought crime in Gotham City's outer suburbs and often teamed up with Tim on adventures.

In a flashback to Stephanie's childhood, she is shown (like the letter-writing Stephanie of the beginning of this chapter) with a towel tied into a cape around her shoulders. The little girl cries "I'm Sooperman!" 35, but otherwise adheres to a stereotypically feminine personal identity: she plays with Barbie dolls and wears her hair in pigtails. She does not invent a 'sooperwoman' for herself; like the girls in Dyson's observed group she is "more concerned about gaining access than critiquing images; [she is] more concerned about [her] right to appropriate an available role." 36

Like Betty, Stephanie's desire to be Robin's match in skills and role is coupled with a wish to be his match romantically. Chuck Dixon, co-creator of the character, described her motivation thusly:

"Her whole reason for becoming the Spoiler was to get back at her dad. Her reason for continuing to put on the mask and cape is to be near Robin. She's a teenager. That's enough motivation for her...for now."

37

The second Robin-reflection, introduced a year after Stephanie, was a fifteen-year-old girl by the name of Raquel Ervine. Raquel was rather a character in the 'Dakotaverse' title *Icon*. The Dakotaverse, so named for being set within the fictional American city of Dakota, was the world in which the titles put out by Milestone Media (a group distributed by DC Comics) took place. There was some crossover between the Dakotaverse

and the DC Universe; Raquel, like Stephanie, could be found bantering with Superboy.

Icon, described by one effusive critic as "an exemplar of Afrofuturism that sweeps antebellum memories, hip-hop cultures, and cyberpunk into its compass" 38, is the story of a superpowered alien in the form of a Black man, Icon/Augustus, and his sidekick, Rocket/Raquel. Raquel, unlike Stephanie, is not content to merely appropriate roles outside her own race and gender identity; she wants to be "a writer like Toni Morrison" 39.

Raquel meets Augustus when she and several other teens break into his house to rob him. Socioeconomically and morally, she is positioned in a way highly evocative of the 'unsuitable' Robin Jason Todd -- she is poverty-stricken to the point where property theft seems the only viable option. Rocket's link to Robin is made plain on the cover of *Icon* #31, which recreates the cover of *Batman* #1 with Icon in Batman's place and Rocket in Robin's.

The cover of *Icon* #1 also plays with mirroring and commenting on the covers of early *Batman* comics. On the first *Icon* cover, both hero and sidekick are present in full costume, with Rocket at the fore. The tagline reads "She's got your hero right here!" 40. This is a reversal of the cover to *Detective Comics* #38, where Batman is depicted as introducing Robin to the reading audience. Robin is shown to us by the hero, while Rocket is capable not only of introducing herself but of showing us the hero as well.

Both Raquel and Stephanie are forced to temporarily abandon their crime-fighting alter egos when they discover that they are pregnant. Both girls choose to carry the child to term, with

Rocket becoming "the first unwed teenage mother to don the costume of a superhero" 41 and a page of preliminary costume sketches for Stephanie in a *Batman* book describing the artist's process as "try[ing] to imagine what a teenaged single mother could do to impress the World's Greatest Detective" 42.

Juxtaposed beside the chaste Tim Drake (whom Stephanie describes as the "Boy Virgin" 43), this evidence of sexual maturity is perhaps the most obvious site of the difference between the Post-Modern Age Robin and his counterparts.

Also in the ranks of young single-parent heroes by this stage was Green Arrow's old sidekick, now going by the name Arsenal. The Speedy mantle, temporarily uninhabited, remained a viable possible outlet for that which Tim Drake wasn't and couldn't be.

At the same time that Jim Starlin was pestering DC to give Jason Todd AIDS, Green Arrow was being applauded for its depictions of gay people 44. A decade later, the book was helmed by a new generation of creators but the liberal-leaning freedom afforded to the title remained. These new writers began to create stories which referenced not only the death of Robin, but also addressed the gaps and silences present in the narratives of those earlier comics, including the unused AIDS storyline.

Kevin Smith, well known for the abundance of pop-culture references in his work, has utilised imagery of the death of Jason Todd in his films 45, small-press comics work 46, and on his website, where a chance for readers to choose the characters included in an upcoming line of action figures carried with it the comment that "You can't vote for any of them to be beaten by a crowbar and blown up by the Joker (although what you do

with them at home is your own business)" 47. The tone of the references -- especially in the short-lived comics series *Bluntman and Chronic* , where the death is described by the cover copy as "inevitable", and is jarring and out-of-place in the story -- is one of cynicism and critique.

Smith gave the *Green Arrow* title yet another reboot in 2000, with his story *Quiver*. *Quiver* contained a conversation which combined the comparative histories of Speedy and Robin and the death of Jason. Visiting heaven with his friend Green Lantern, Green Arrow catches sight of Jason in the distance.

Green Arrow: Oh, my God -- is that *Robin* ?!

Green Lantern: *One* of them.

Green Arrow: *Spooky* [Batman] didn't even mention it to me.

Green Lantern: It was a long time ago. He's got a new kid now.

Green Arrow: It wasn't *drugs* , was it? I mean, him and *Roy* hung out a lot and I'd hate to think that he...

48

Quiver , which features Spoiler/Stephanie in the role of Batman's offsider and does not include Tim Drake at all, also marks the first appearance of Mia Dearden, a blonde teenage runaway working as a prostitute. Halfway through the storyline Mia offers a commentary on a cartoon she's watching, obviously meant to be Cartoon Network's "Powerpuff Girls".

"It's about *time* they made something that tells little girls that they don't have to be *cute* or nicey-nice or *domestic* . They can make just as much *difference* as any stupid boy." 49

Smith's choice to use the Powerpuff Girls as the example Mia references underscores the ways in which this character, as the eventual new Speedy, will act as an embodiment of that which Robin can no longer contain.

The Powerpuff Girls can be seen as playing a similar role in popular television as Speedy does in comics; taking up discourses once carried by Robin but which are now no longer articulated by that character. The Powerpuffs are contacted by the Mayor of their fictional city via a "Batman-style hotline phone" 50, and the show is designed to have the double-address form for both adult and child audiences which was pioneered by the 1960s Batman program. It is kitsch and sly. The Powerpuff Girls are some of the new carriers of the torch of pop and camp abandoned by a post-sixties Robin.

Another important aspect of the Powerpuff Girls, even if it is one which Mia dismisses with her remark, is that they're cute. To quote Donna Potts' study of the Powerpuff Girls as positive female media images,

The show also challenges the notion that stereotypically feminine qualities like sweetness and innocence cannot coexist with toughness. One viewer writes that, "[w]hile Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup retain an ingenuous childish charm, they are by no means pushovers; these little girls could and would whoop the stuffing out of you if you ever threatened Townsville. They're cute, but

dangerous. As a cute person, I greatly appreciate having such positive role models. Buttercup is my hero." 51

This need for female characters who are both cute and tough can also be found in Stephanie, of whom comics commentator and journalist Katherine Keller observed the following:

Steph made a point of putting glitter gel in her hair, and they showed Steph making the costume with a skirt, and what I got out of it was Steph saying, "Yeah, I'm a girly girl -- and I'm going to kick your ass." 52

Smith's choice to include Stephanie in the story introducing Mia is worthy of remark. As outlined earlier, Stephanie has, at this point, not yet gone through the same process of seeking out pop-culture role models/heroes of her own gender in the ways Mia is with the Powerpuffs and Raquel has with Toni Morrison.

Jason and Stephanie's mothers were both drug addicts, and Mia -- a street kid, driven to crime, taken in by a vigilante mentor -- carries in her echoes of both the Robin-who-died and of Spoiler.

The next writer to take up a sustained, multiple-storyline run on *Green Arrow* was Judd Winick, who took over the book in 2002. Among Winick's most well-known and critically acclaimed works is his graphic novel *Pedro and Me*, a non-fiction account of the death of one of Winick's close friends from AIDS. This, combined with a subsequent story in the *Green Lantern* title dealing with homophobia, led to the writer earning a reputation as "the soap-box guy" 53 in comics.

In 2004, Winick -- a self-professed fan of the Jason Todd Robin 54 -- did with the second Speedy what Jim Starlin had been unable to do with the second Robin. The Associated Press broke the story of Mia's HIV positive status in October of that year.

When questioned if this was the most appropriate way to tell a story of this type, Winick was quick to point out that "[Green Lantern and Green Arrow] have a very long history of telling stories that have some sort of social conscience." 55

This suitability extends beyond the specific title, and is in fact embedded in the basic structure of the medium. As Richard Natale, writing in *The Village Voice*, described, the difficulty of AIDS narratives in cinema is that "movies generally deal in closure and resolution. AIDS has thus far resisted making itself accessible in that way." 56 *Green Arrow* is a monthly comic, and must therefore avoid any real closure and resolution; if it were to find them, it would simply restart itself again and begin the cycle anew. And, as Winick himself points out, DC Comics has a stable of "characters that have been around for 60 years and haven't aged a day." 57

Interviewed by CNN, Winick described Mia as "unafraid of death 58 " and explained that "It isn't about death and dying. Young people, for good or for bad, are still pretty fearless 59." These statements, coupled with Winick's declaration that "She will never die of AIDS related causes on my watch and hopefully on anyone else's watch 60 ", create a situation in which Mia's diagnosis can be read as the tensions present in all sidekick figures writ large. She may never grow any older, or become sick, but the threat which time's progression represents to her current status -- as both healthy teenager and vigilante protege -- is evident and named.

Mia, then, has become the embodiment of the possibilities not allowed to Tim Drake (or even to Jason Todd, who pushed the boundaries of Robin so far that they snapped), just as the Silver Age Speedy could be relevant in ways unavailable to the Robin of that era. She is a teen whose mortality is, through the HIV

storyline, put on display; a situation which ties her to the deconstruction and reconstruction Frank Miller performed on Robin in *The Dark Knight Returns* .

Carrie, Raquel and Mia defined the Post-Modern Age Robin as a White, dark-haired, wealthy male teenager as much as Tim Drake did, because they were created with characteristics deliberately other to Robin's traits in order to define them as separate figures. The killing-off of Jason had drawn the lines edging Robin as firmly as any narrative act could; only those who fitted the now very specific Robin criteria could play the role.

A key feature of these requirements is the need for the Robin of any given text to successfully connect to the merchandise bearing his image. Quite simply, Time Warner's Robin is a boy.

As soon as the necessities of branding are removed from the equation, the possibilities expand. Spoiler, though serving the same narrative functions as Robin in numerous storylines (such as the aforementioned *Quiver*), had no mandate to fit a certain pre-established mold even as she drew on the tropes and motifs of the Robin legacy. Many writers and storylines made it abundantly clear that the Spoiler was a Girl Wonder: she, like Dick, Jason, and Tim, surfs on the tops of trains as a mode of transport [61](#) ; she chatters brightly to Batman as they track supervillains made of bugs [62](#) ; she even uses 'Robin' as her name when working undercover [63](#). But, as well as being the all the same things as Robin was, she was the things which the carefully built Post-Modern Age Robin couldn't be.

In 1996, DC Comics published a many-title crossover event called 'Legends of the Dead Earth', the conceit of which was that in a far-flung future all the now-current heroes have become

folk legends. The protagonists of the Death Earth stories appropriate the figures which they need to believe in or be. The *Detective Comics* issue of this series was the tale of three children, named Dealy, Bruggo and Geela, who create an elaborate game for themselves in which they are Batman's helpers.

The storyline recalls that of 'The Batman Nobody Knows', a 1973 story examined by Will Brooker in the introduction to *Batman Unmasked*, in which three boys explain who Batman is to them. Brooker feels that the Black child who imagines a Black Batman is not truly impacting upon, or contributing to, the mosaic of possible Batman interpretations -- "freedom to construct meanings specific to one's interpretive community should not necessarily be seen as having any power in itself to transform society" 64. He does, however, acknowledge that this status quo would undergo a "fundamental shift" should DC Comics and Time Warner cease creating 'canon' for Batman. Then Batman stories would be "remembered, misremembered and retold alongside new ones in the contemporary equivalent of a folk tale" 65.

Such is the situation in Dwayne McDuffie's unpublished Batman comic *Legend of the Black Bat*, the script of which is available to download on the internet. McDuffie, creator of Rocket/Raquel, imagines a future in which an old man tells some children the story of a Black Batman. The children question if the tale is real. The man offers several answers:

"It doesn't matter if it's true, boy."

"What matters is it could be."

"A good story needs a moral, how about this: You

can be anything you want to be. Never let anybody ever tell you different. Now go play." 66

Dealy, Bruggo and Geela also live in a time when there is no longer any 'official' Batman text. One day, as Dealy and Bruggo go to play with the junkyard robot they have designated as their Batman, they encounter Geela -- the only female member of their trio. She, like Dealy, is dressed in a home-made Robin costume. Dealy has been explaining to Bruggo that Bruggo can't have a costume because "There's only one Robin". Geela, smirking, objects, and the following exchange takes place.

Geela: "There was *too* more than one Robin! One of them was even a *girl* !"

Dealy: "There was never more than one Robin at *one time* ! And who *says* there was a girl Robin?"

Geela: "There *coulda* been! *You* don't know!" 67

With no 'true' text to contradict them, the children are able to shape the Robin figure to suit their own needs and circumstances. There can be more than one Robin at once, if they want, or a girl Robin, or a Black Batman, or anything else which they might imagine.

The *Robin* issue of the Legends of the Dead Earth crossover also featured a female Robin. Even DC Comics' own texts acknowledge that an era when Batman and Robin are no longer owned by individual entities or companies will be an era in which girls will be among the groups opting to access and appropriate the Robin figure. The 'Legends of the Dead Earth' stories demonstrate that though current media may withhold

Robin from those who might wish for emotional ownership, a day will come when the characters are owned by none and all.

However, that day has not yet arrived.

When Tim was forced to give up being Robin in 2004, Stephanie created a costume for herself (one with a short red skirt, conjuring memories of Betty's earlier outfit) and, like Carrie, told Batman to call her Robin 68.

It seemed so wildly unlikely that Tim Drake could do anything but return to the role of Robin that little fan energy was spent worrying about his fate. Stephanie's, however, was a matter for concern, especially when the issues featuring this new, fourth Robin directly and overtly referenced the storylines which had led up to Jason's death 69. Within the text itself, two of Tim's classmates articulate the equal excitement and pessimism of the time:

Darla: "I'm just glad to see a girl finally got the job."

Bernard: "Well, don't get used to her. She's doomed."
70

In the real world, newspaper articles cheerfully mused on upcoming possible storylines - "two Robins going to prom together" 71. Could it be that Geela and Bruggo's imagined world of multiple Robins working together (one of them "even a girl!") would come to pass? Or would the Post-Modern Age -- an era, let it not be forgotten, characterised by meanings found in the relationship with earlier eras and stories -- bear down on Stephanie and, through her death, once again eliminate and displace the things Tim Drake wasn't?

In the closing months of 2004, after three months' worth of issues featuring the Stephanie Robin, the Gotham-wide crossover story *War Games* incorporated all the Batman-related titles into one narrative. Stephanie's major function in the storyline was to be captured and tortured by a supervillain, sometimes with a power drill. She did not survive.

As a member of the online Batman fandom at the time of Stephanie's stint as Robin, I saw firsthand the anger and distress her fate caused in many readers, including many women and girls. As such impassioned reactions are not uncommon among internet fan groups, I allowed twelve months to pass before asking fans to offer their opinion on what had happened.

Like Rhiannon Bury in her study of women in the online X-files fan culture 72, I actively participated in the community-making and discussion processes of the group I observed. My interactions with the fan-group I looked at took place primarily through the internet site LiveJournal, a hybrid of the weblog and messageboard formats. Posts containing fan-art or fanfiction were equal to, and intermingled with, updates and musing on the participants' daily lives. As with the children in Dyson's study, these people used their stories about shared cultural icons -- in both instances, superheroes -- as a site of establishing and managing social connections 73.

Some of the replies to my call for comments on Stephanie are quoted below, attributed to the names which the respondents opted to be listed as. Bracketed ellipses indicate where I have edited for length.

"The entire Steph situation disgusts me beyond words. [...] It makes me literally sick, to the point where I don't even know how to start talking to

people who don't understand why it's so horrific. A character who's been around for over a decade gets killed as a result of bad, bad writing, in a completely gratuitous way, and is promptly blamed for it. If there's a better way to drive me from comics... well, I'm sure they'll find it soon." -- LC

"They might as well slap one of those Yorkie Bar wrappers on the covers of the Batbooks: "Batman: Not For Girls!"" - Notpoetry

"I am *absolutely* disgusted with canon [...] I still read fanfic, and lots of it." -- Katarik

"She had so much potential as a character and the editors and writers threw it away for a crappy, forgettable story. Fic and fandom make it a little better." -- riah chan

"Writing Steph now is an act of defiance and denial -- but it's also an attempt to redeem the morass of bad intentions and bad writing which canon gave us. [...] There was a lot of good, meaty potential in the concept of having Stephanie Brown be Robin IV, and if it's up to us to do something with it, well, then, we *will*." -- Te 74

The feminine forces connected to Robin -- both within the text and without -- won't and can't be made quiet. If the comics eliminate the Girl Wonder with a power drill some fans will simply disregard the comics entirely (and, when dealing with a situation influenced by matters of corporate control, few small acts are as pointed as simply ignoring the product) and write their own stories and draw their own art.

Still, the texts exist. Batman and Robin are not yet a part of the folkloric public domain, and Tim Drake is once again wearing the mask and cape.

As stated earlier, this chapter's focus has necessitated positioning Tim Drake as constraining Robin's liminal potential by forcing the character to be a wealthy White male in a black cape with a grim look on his face, more Batboy than Boy Wonder. Such a position is obviously, as with any reductive summation of a text as large as each of the Robins' back-issue catalogue, unfair to the nuances of the character within the narrative, but the same could be said of any of the young heroes explored in this chapter. Rocket is not Spoiler is not Speedy, but all function as distinct alternatives to the Post-Modern Age Robin and share with one another significant character and situational features.

Whether this is enough -- whether those who plead for those in power to let them "have Robin" will be content instead with a Robin-reflection -- remains to be seen. Resistant and negotiated readings will always be undertaken by some branches of the audience group, be they children at play or fanfiction writers, but it is hard to remain wholly optimistic about a situation where girls are told that attempts to access Robin as a character for them to play at being will result in death-by-power-drill.

In one study done of superhero play among young children, a Batwoman role was especially created (the researchers had, unsurprisingly, not heard of the very-rarely-used character by this name from the comics) as a like-gender option for the girls to appropriate if they chose to do so. One of the male students offered a succinct answer as to why it would have been unfair to for his classmates if the game had been left with only Batman available as a role: "They'd think it's not for girls" 75. As

demonstrated by examples cited above, girls are often capable of disregarding whether a text is "for" them or not -- they will still play at being "Soooperman", they will still dress up as Robin -- but it takes a particularly stubborn textual negotiator to stare down a story which so thoroughly obliterates their point of identification.

But the female half of Robin is never fully removed. At the end of 2004, the *Teen Titans* title ran a storyline in which the current team members find themselves in the future. In this new world, Tim Drake has become a ruthless murderous Batman, and Stephanie Brown and Carrie Kelley are both dead. And, at this moment when the female Robin legacy seems obliterated, Mia is depicted for the first time in her Speedy costume 76 and Betty makes an unexpected return from disuse as a crime-fighting, Batman-opposing Batwoman 77. Attempts to remove female Robin or Robin-type characters continually result in another return of the figure through another channel.

And perhaps one day the end to the story of Stephanie Brown will be forgotten, and the more important part will be retained by children who want to play Batman games: There was too more than one Robin. One of them was even a girl.

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Boy and Girl Wonders: An Interview with Mary Borsellino (Part One)

By Henry Jenkins. Originally published at http://henryjenkins.org/2009/06/an_interview_with_mary_borsellino.html

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Robin didn't start with Robin. Robin won't end when Robin ends. In fact, it's arguable that Robin's already begun to move on from Robin.

In less smartypants language, what I mean is that the ingredients which were brought together to create the character of "Robin," Batman's red-and-green-and-gold-wearing sidekick, were ingredients which already shared numerous common elements. And once Robin could no longer embody these elements, other pop culture arose to take over the character's place.

Or so goes the opening paragraphs of Mary Borsellino's fascinating new work, *Girl and Boy Wonders: Robin in Cultural Context*. The self-published text, which can be [downloaded here](#), explodes with new insights and information about Batman's oft-neglected and marginalized sidekick, the kinds of information that could only come from a dedicated aca-fan. I will be honest that despite being a life-long Batman fan, I had never given that much consideration to Robin's cultural origins, his contributions to the series, or his influence on our culture. Works like William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson's *The Many Lives of the Batman* or Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* have made significant contributions to our understanding of the mythology around the dark knight, but most of them given short shrift to his "old

chum." Borsellino argues that Robin's marginalization, sometimes in response to homophobia, sometimes in response to a desire for a "more mature" caped crusader, is part of his message. The character has special appeal, she argues, for "those readers and viewers who are themselves marginalized."

I checked in with Borsellino recently, asking her to share some of her insights with my readers.

This project emerged in part from your own very active involvement in Project Girl Wonder, which responded to what you saw as DC's neglect of Stephanie Brown. Can you give us some background on this controversy? What were the issues involved? Why was this character so important to you? What was the outcome of the campaign?

Actually, Project Girl Wonder came about out of the project. I was so immersed in the potential meanings of all the stuff going on with Robin in comics, and so tuned in to the rapid decline of relevance with DC's mandated interpretation of Robin. The idea of Stephanie Brown as Robin was so fresh and strange as a direction, but was handled so clumsily and with such obvious institutionalised sexism that it was pretty vile to witness, both as a cultural observer and as a fan who's also a feminist.

Essentially, for those not familiar with the character or with Robin's larger back story: when the second Robin, a boy named Jason, died, Batman created a memorial out of his costume in the Batcave. Stephanie was the fourth Robin, and her costume was different to the three boys who'd had it before her in that she sewed a red skirt for herself. Just a few months after her first issue as Robin was released, Stephanie was tortured to death with a power drill by a villain, and then died with Batman at her bedside.

The sexualised violence alone was pretty vomitous, but what made it so, so much worse for me was that Batman promptly

forgot her. DC's Editor in Chief had the gall to respond to questions of how her death would affect future stories by saying that her loss would continue to impact the stories of the heroes - - how sick is that? Not only is the statement clearly untrue, since the comics were chugging along their merry way with no mention of her or her death, but it was also an example of the ingrained sexism of so much of our culture. Stephanie herself was a hero, and had been a hero for more than a decade's worth of comics, but the Editor's statement made it clear that he only thought of male characters as heroes, and the females as catalysts for those stories. It was a very clear example of the [Women in Refrigerators](#) trope, which has been a problem with superhero comics for far, far too long.

Long story short, I got together with a few like-minded comics fans and set out to petition DC Comics into giving Stephanie a memorial like Jason's -- to acknowledge that she was just as much a hero, and just as much Robin, as any of the boys. It made such a clear and striking image: a costume in a memorial case, just like Jason's now-iconic one, but this time with a little red skirt on it as well. We couldn't have asked for a better logo for our cause.

We were lucky enough to have some invaluable help, both outside comics and inside. Shannon Cochran wrote a wonderful, in-depth article about the situation for *Bitch* magazine; we were a Yahoo site of the day; the webcomic *Shortpacked* ran a sharply funny strip about it all; and several comics writers working for DC -- Geoff Johns and Grant Morrison, in particular -- dropped references to the absence/potential presence of a memorial case for Stephanie into comics.

In the end, DC glossed it all over by having a storyline where Stephanie shows up, miraculously alive this whole time, and having the current Robin say to Batman "oh! you always knew

she was alive! no wonder you never made her a memorial case!". Despite the fact that stories in the interim had featured Stephanie's death, autopsy, burial, and appearances as a spirit in the afterlife. Nope, Batman knew she was alive the whole time! Good job with the damage control there, DC.

Still, a live heroine's better than a dead one any day, so I count the whole thing as a victory in the end.

Critics have written a fair amount about how Batman's persona was inspired by earlier popular heroes, including Sherlock Holmes and the Douglas Fairbank's version of Zorro. What popular figures helped to inform the initial conception of Robin?

Within comics, the most direct inspiration was Junior, who was Dick Tracy's young offsider. Robin was the first time that boy helper figure was put into a superhero costume, but Junior was playing the detective's assistant role years before, and screwing up in all the same ways Robin so often does, ending up as a hostage and things like that. More widely, you've gone halfway to answering your own question -- Sherlock Holmes had Watson there, to listen to his theories and help solve the mysteries. The sidekick role has been around a long time, and provided the template for Robin's role.

Culturally, the figure of the daredevil boy hero is an ancient one, dating back through epic literature of the middle ages to the statuary and myths of Greece and Rome. Robin just gave the archetype a new costume.

You suggest that the marginalization of Robin as a character has helped to make the sidekick a particularly potent point of reference for other groups who also feel marginalized. Explain.

The two examples I use in my book are queer fans and women, though I also know readers who've used this same framework for class and race. As a queer person, or a woman, or someone of a marginalised socio-economic background, or a non-Caucasian person, it's often necessary to perform a negotiated reading on a text before there's any way to identify with any character within it. Rather than being able to identify an obvious and overt avatar within the text, a viewer in such a position has to use cues and clues to find an equivalent through metaphor a lot of the time.

A recent example of this is Spock and Uhura in the new *Star Trek* movie. Uhura has always been vitally important as a role model to women of colour -- even Martin Luther King Jr thought so. And she still fulfils that role in the new movie. The narrative themes of racial discrimination and of the conflicts which dual cultural heritage can bring with it are in the movie as well, but they're not the story of Uhura, because Gene Roddenberry was committed to the idea of a future where the crew of a starship could be mixed-race without remark. The character who offers these is Spock: he's the one with all the 'outsider' cues in his makeup, which I think goes part of the way to understanding why the recent *Star Trek* movie has seen a massive re-emergence of Kirk/Spock slash on the fannish landscape: female fans and those seeking a queer reading are drawn to that sense of marginalisation, of the ongoing fight to be recognised as present and worthy.

I got off-topic a bit there, sorry -- my reason for bringing up Spock and Uhura was to demonstrate that 'otherness' as part of a character's construction isn't necessarily bound directly to traits such as race or gender. It can stand for them, but does so obliquely. And Robin, by being put down and rejected by wave after wave of commentators and creators, has come to embody anything that's been sidelined or disregarded,

anything that's rejected in the relentless quest to make Batman as heteronormatively masculine and dour as possible. Just as those who fight against personal discrimination can find an avatar in Spock, those who struggle to re-establish their voice in dialogues where they've been silenced can find an avatar in the way Robin is pushed out of the way by official texts.

Many know of the ways that DC has struggled with the homophobia surrounding the relationship between Batman and Robin. How has this concern shaped the deployment of Robin over time? Are there any signs that in an era of legalized gay marriage, our culture may be less anxious about these issues?

We also live in an age of Prop 8, alas. I live in Australia, and both Australia and America recently switched from a longstanding conservative leadership to a potentially more progressive government -- but both Prime Minister Rudd and President Obama have gone on-record as saying that they believe marriage should be between a man and a woman. Progress hasn't yet progressed as far as I'd like to see it go, frankly.

And I think DC Comics is an absolute trainwreck mess at this point, to be even more frank. You only have to look at *All Star Batman and Robin*, by Frank Miller and Jim Lee, to see what a disaster the company's current concept of a flagship book is. The writing's incredibly sloppy, sexist, homophobic, and unengaging. "That is so queer" is used by Robin as a slur. Batman calls Robin "retarded" and declares himself "the goddamn Batman". It would be hilarious if it wasn't so awful.

It hasn't always been that bad, of course, but right now it appears to me that DC is more anxious than ever about potential gay readings. And then there's Christian Bale, who has stated outright that he'll go on strike if anybody tries to incorporate Robin into the movie franchise. His Batman is so

joyless that it's no wonder everybody went starry-eyed for the Joker -- the guy may be a psychopath, but at least he seems to know that running around Gotham City in a stupid outfit is meant to be fun.

You argue that Robin is in many ways a "transgender figure." Explain.

Robin crosses all sorts of imposed gender boundaries, both literal and figurative. Carrie Kelley, for example, the young girl who becomes Robin in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, is referred to by a news broadcaster as 'the Boy Wonder'; she looks completely androgynous in-costume, and so is assumed to be a boy. Dick Grayson and Tim Drake both assume female identities to go undercover in numerous stories -- Dick even played Bruce's wife on one occasion back in the forties -- and Stephanie Brown's superhero identity before she became a Robin, the Spoiler, is thought to be a boy even by her own father.

Those are just the literal examples of gender transgression. There're also a lot of background cultural cues coming into play, in the way the Robin costume looks, the way different backstories for the Robins are structured, and how sidekicks function in adventure narratives -- all these elements work against the notion of pinning Robin down as definitively male or female as a character; the only classification which really fits is that of being constantly in-motion between options and unclassifiable.

Boy and Girl Wonders: An Interview with Mary Borsellino (Part Two)

You describe a number of recent texts which have drawn implicitly and explicitly on the figure of Robin. I wanted to

get you to comment on a few of these. I was surprised for example to see that *Dexter* had made such significant references to Robin. What do you think is going on there?

Heaven knows! The references to Robin in the *Dexter* books and TV series are one of the most interesting recent uses of the Robin figure, simply because they're so removed from our ordinary understanding of Robin as a pop figure. Out of all the fantasy figures a serial killer could potentially imagine himself as, why does he return again and again to Robin imagery? It may partly be because Dexter's vigilante training by his adoptive father is such a crucial element in who he is: without that education, he wouldn't be able to thrive in the world, just as Robin is defined by Batman's influence.

It may also relate to the fact that Dexter's origin story is a dark mirror to Robin's: both are orphaned as children and taken in by a crime fighter. Comics to this day experiment with 'what if' scenarios: what if baby Kal-El's capsule had crashed in Russia, things like that. The *Dexter* novels are almost a what-if of what could happen if Robin's childhood trauma created a sociopath rather than a child hell-bent on stopping bad guys.

What aspects of Robin did Eminem evoke in his "Without Me" music video?

Primarily the daredevil-trickster-troublemaker aspects; he's made a career out of being the village fool who's not scared of saying that the emperor has no clothes. Eminem most obviously borrows Robin's costume and some of the 60s TV show's set pieces -- walking up walls and things like that -- but on a deeper level, Eminem borrows Robin's eternal boyhood, and the freedom that youth brings with it. I think it's really interesting that three of the current musicians whom I cite as drawing most heavily on what Robin represents and offers -- Eminem, Pete Wentz, and Gerard Way -- are all in their thirties, and yet all

three are still seen very much of being the voice of a generation that's only just over half that age. Eminem's got a teenage daughter and yet he's not yet perceived as a 'grown up' himself. How does he manage that? I think the answer lies partially in the way he employs tropes like Robin in his persona. He's a boy who never grows up.

Given your analysis of the character, which writer do you think has offered us the richest, most nuanced depiction of Robin and why?

This is a tough one to answer, because the nuances of Robin come about because of the opportunity later writers have to build on what earlier writers laid down as foundations. So I could rattle off an answer and say Devin Grayson's Nightwing/Huntress series was an excellent depiction of the way Robin's sexuality might develop when he reaches adulthood, and what qualities he ends up attracted to in a partner or Andersen Gabrych's grasp of what qualities Batman is drawn to in Robins, and why those are exactly the worst qualities for a Gotham vigilante to have, is the stuff of epic gothic tragedy -- but Grayson and Gabrych's especial genius in their work isn't simply telling great stories; it's taking the disparate pieces of such a disjointed history and melding them into a coherent, nuanced whole.

There have been, of course, many attempts to depict Robin outside his/her relationship to Batman -- as a member of the Teen Titans or as an adult figure on his own right. What impact have these efforts had on the public perception of this figure?

I'm not sure that Robin's able to remain Robin all that well once the relationship with Batman is pushed to the back. I love the whole Teen Titans concept, but it and 'Robin' as a role seem to inevitably become mutually exclusive: it was in Teen Titans that Dick Grayson quit being Robin and instead became Nightwing.

The Robin of the Teen Titans cartoon became Nightwing, as well, in a storyline set in the future, and there's a strong narrative thread throughout the cartoon of Slade acting almost as a surrogate Batman for Robin to clash with.

Robin with Batman is the protege, the squire, the ward: the student, essentially. Robin with the Teen Titans is no older than Robin with Batman, but with the Teen Titans he's the leader, rather than the student. There's too much cognitive dissonance between the two roles, and so time and time again it breaks down: either Robin quits the Teen Titans, or quits being Robin. Both outcomes have happened numerous times in the comics.

Mary Borsellino is a freelance writer in Melbourne, Australia. She has published essays about subjects such as the shifting portrayals of Batman's childhood family, a feminist critique of the TV show *Supernatural*, and gender in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics. She is currently working on a series of YA novels which will begin release later this year and which have been described as '*Twilight* for punks'. Mary is the Assistant Editor of the journal *Australian Philanthropy*.

