

MICHAEL USLAN

BATMAN'S CRUSADER

The amazing story of one man's journey from funny pages "fan boy" to executive producer of the Batman films.

The message in Michael Uslan's book *The Boy Who Loved Batman: A Memoir* is: "If you burn with a passion and follow your dreams, they will indeed come true." As a young boy in New Jersey, Uslan loved comic books, amassing a collection exceeding 30,000. One superhero held his attention over all others: Batman.

Then came that fateful night in 1966. After watching the premiere of the campy Batman TV show, Uslan vowed to one day bring the true Caped Crusader to life on the big screen. He worked his way up the ranks at DC Comics and later at United Artists, where the die-hard Batman fan learned the ins and outs of the movie business. Uslan eventually obtained the film rights to the comic book icon, and his interpretation of Batman forever changed the way we view superhero flicks. Coinciding with the summer 2012 release of *The Dark Knight Rises*, we sat down with Uslan for this exclusive interview.

HUSTLER: What was the very first comic book you ever bought?

MICHAEL USLAN: Growing up in the '50s or '60s, most kids were first exposed to comic books in the barbershop: Casper, Richie Rich, Little Dot and Baby Huey. The first ones I bought were Sugar & Spike #2, which was like *Look Who's Talking* years before the film was made, and *Strange Adventures*, which scared the bajebees out of me. I graduated to Archie, which formed every notion I ever had about high school and dating. From there it was Superman. Then I graduated to Batman.

What drew you to Batman?

He was the first superhero I ever read about who was human. He had no superpowers. His greatest superpower was his humanity. I believed if I worked out and studied hard and if my dad bought me a cool car, I could be this guy. Plus his origin story was so primal and emotional. At eight or ten years old, I was reading this story about a kid my age seeing his parents murdered in front of his eyes. That had an incredible impact on me on every level. If you wanted to find out which comic book heroes are the most popular and have the most longevity, you have to look at the supervillains. They ultimately define the superhero. And Batman unarguably has the best supervillains ever created. And certainly the best of all time: The Joker.

Did your parents actively support your collecting habit even at a time when there was a movement to ban comic books?

They did, which was incredible. When I started collecting, there was the "Seduction of the Innocent" movement led by psychiatrist

Fredric Wertham. He started a clinic in Brooklyn. There he interviewed a hundred juvenile delinquents. They all said at one time or another they had read a comic book. Therefore, Dr. Wertham concluded that comic books caused juvenile delinquency. He went on to explain that they also caused homosexuality, lesbianism and, worst of all, asthma. That's because children were staying indoors to read them instead of playing in the fresh air.

Dr. Wertham hit the lecture circuit, speaking at garden clubs, PTAs and churches. His book caught on. As a result, most of my friends were not allowed to bring comics into the house and were forbidden to read them—although they still did. Bobby's dad burned his collection in front of us—shoveled them into the fireplace: Spider-Man #1, Fantastic Four #1, Avengers #1, X-Men #1. Bobby and I sat down and tried to mentally add up the value of what was lost. It was over a million dollars' worth.

Tell us your feelings about the Batman TV show.

Before that show came on, I couldn't wait. I was simultaneously thrilled and horrified by what I saw. Thrilled because it was in color, and the sets were clearly expensive. The car was cool. The opening animation looked like Bob Kane's art from the old comics. But when I realized the whole world was laughing at Batman as he was dancing the Batoosie and spraying giant sharks with Bat Shark Repellent, I was horrified. It just killed me that everyone was laughing at my favorite superhero. I made my own Bruce Wayne vow on that cold winter night in 1966. I swore then that somehow, someday, some way I would find a way to show the world what the dark and serious Batman was like—the only true Batman I knew.

Is it true that you taught the first collegiate course on comic books?

I was a junior in college at the time. It was the early 1970s at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, where they had an experimental curriculum department. If you had an idea for a course that had never been taught and had the backing of a department on campus, you could appear before a panel of deans and professors to pitch it. I designed a course on comic books that conveyed them as a legitimate American art form as indigenous in this country as jazz. Sociologically, it's a mirror of ourselves: comic books as contemporary American folklore. It's our modern-day mythology. I claimed that the ancient gods of Greece, Rome and Egypt still exist, but today they are in spandex and capes.

Did teaching about comic books get you a job at DC Comics?

The day I got the course approved, I was on cloud nine walking back to my apartment. I couldn't believe I'd pulled this off. Then my

mother's voice popped into my head: "Michael, you can have the greatest creative ideas in the world. But if you don't market yourself, no one will ever know about them."

I got back to my apartment, picked up a phone and called United Press International, which at the time was as big a news syndicate as AP [Associated Press] is today. I started screaming at this reporter, "How could this be happening, and you're not doing anything about it? There is a course on comic books being taught at Indiana University! Are you telling me that as a taxpayer, they're using my money to teach our children comic books? This has got to be a Communist plot to subvert the youth of America!" Then I slammed down the phone.

Three days later, that reporter tracked me down. I did an interview that was picked up by virtually every newspaper in North America and Europe. My phone never stopped ringing. I started doing radio and TV talk shows. I never once taught a class where there weren't TV cameras and reporters. Two weeks later, Stan Lee called. He said, "I've been hearing you on the radio and seeing you on TV. What you're doing is great for the comic book industry. How can I help?"

Two hours later, the president of DC Comics called and said, "We would like to fly you to New York to discuss ways we can work with an innovative young man like you." I got a job there. Not only a summer job, but they put me on retainer when I went back to college.

Why were you dubbed "Junior Woodchuck" at DC Comics?

The title came from the organization that Donald Duck's nephews belonged to. They didn't know what to call us at DC Comics. There were no interns or internships then. We were the first generation of "fan boys" brought in to learn every aspect of the business. I became the assistant to Sol Harrison, the production manager who later became president of DC Comics.

You also got to clean out the archival closet. What treasures did you find?

It was like the last scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This closet at DC had not been touched since the late '60s. I found the original corporate documents in which they seized control of the company from Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, who started DC. All the sales figures for the original comic books, including the first 20 issues of *Action Comics*. I learned that Superman #1 had two printings and that Superman #2 was the first comic to sell a million copies. I found "ash cans," which were dummy copies of comic books used to get the comics' copyrights nailed down. George Reeves' Superman costume. Adam West's costume. It was a gold mine.

How did you end up writing comics for DC?



PHOTOS OF MICHAEL USLAN BY LADIVON JANISKY

By working at DC in the summer, I was at the right place at the right time when the editor desperately needed a script for *The Shadow*. I jumped in and said, "I have an idea for a *Shadow* story!" I didn't. I went in his office, and the wheels started turning. I started to hem and haw. Finally I got enough out that he said, "Can you have this script on my desk by 6 a.m. tomorrow?"

I went home and did it. Then I was a writer for DC Comics! A couple of weeks later, the editor of *Batman* was walking down the hall. He said, "Hey, kid, I read your *Shadow* script. It didn't stink." From him, it was the ultimate compliment. He then said, "How would you like to take a crack at writing *Batman*?"

Why did you take a job in the legal department at United Artists?

Since I couldn't get my foot in the door creatively in the movie industry, I had a plan B: take what I learned at law school and work at a major studio, meet everyone, network like mad. Even in a noncreative job, I could learn what was involved in financing and producing movies. Then I could sneak in a backdoor to get over to the creative side.

You bought the rights to *Batman* at a time when they were thought to be worthless. What did you see that everybody missed?

For me, it was the opportunity to restore dignity to *Batman*, which I promised to do since January of 1966. I thought that by doing serious interpretations of comic books, we could create a new kind of hero and that we would have enormous success with sequels, animation,