

# COMICS THEN

## Batman Gets the Finger!

by Bill Jourdain

In my first column in *Comics Now! Magazine* #1, we told the story of Superman learning of his true origin as told by Golden Age comics writer Bill Finger. Of course, Finger is best known for his co-creation of Batman with Bob Kane in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939. Sadly, Finger was mostly unknown to the comics-reading public until first mentioned in the "Batman's Hotline" letter page in *Detective Comics* #327 (May 1964), and it was not until years later that Kane acknowledged Finger's significant contribution to the creation of the Batman. Coincidentally, *Detective Comics* #327 was the first appearance of the "new look" Batman as conceived by Julius Schwartz and Carmine Infantino. But did you know that Finger not only authored the origin of Superman that appeared in *Superman* #53 (July/August 1948), but he wrote what I call the "Batman Origin Trilogy" that spanned almost the entire Golden Age of Comics?

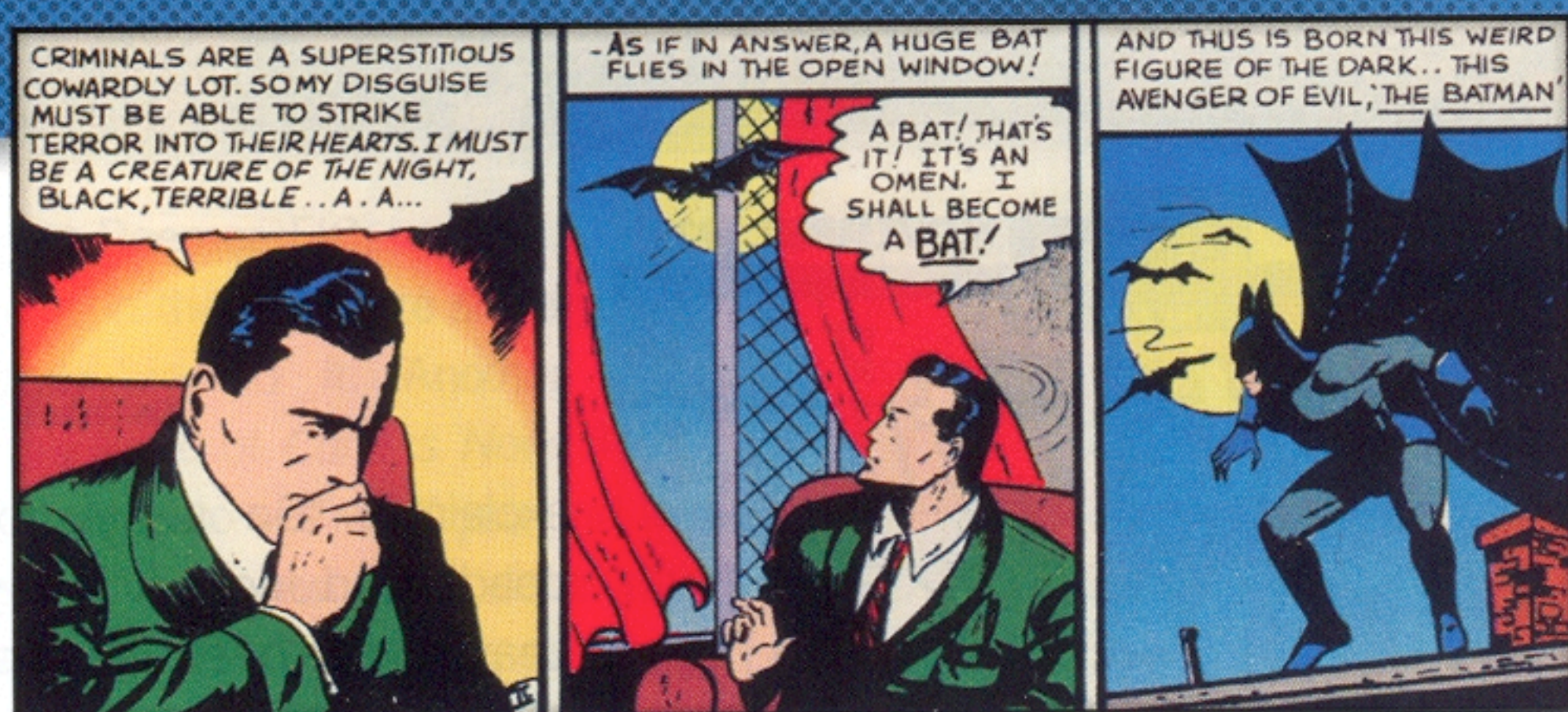
Over a period of seventeen years, from 1939 until 1956, Finger authored three Batman yarns that defined the character's origin. Just about everyone knows that Bruce Wayne became Batman because of the trauma he endured as a child watching his parents gunned down as they left a theater. This story was first told in two short pages by Finger (with art by Bob Kane) in *Detective Comics* #33 (November 1939). In this limited origin, we first see young Bruce witness the tragic death of his parents and make the vow that will change his life forever. Finger tells how Bruce grows to be a young man and trains his body and mind to be the ultimate detective. In one of the fateful moments in the Golden Age of Comic Books, we see Bruce struggling with his future crime-fighting identity. Lost

in introspection, Bruce says, "Criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot. So my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible . . . a . . . a . . ." Suddenly, a bat flies through the open window of his study, at which Bruce exclaims, "A Bat! That's it! It's an omen. I shall become a BAT!" The Dark Knight is born! But who killed Bruce's parents? Finger doesn't tell us, and we are left to assume that it was only a street thug, looking to commit a petty theft. But was that all there was to it?

Almost a decade later in *Batman* #47 (July 1948), Finger was back with a much more detailed origin of the Dark Knight Detective, and we learned the secret of Thomas and Martha Wayne's killer. In a story aptly titled, "The Origin of the Batman!" (Charles Paris inks over Bob Kane pencils), the action begins with Batman and Robin, his youthful crime-fighting partner, discovering a wanted criminal hidden away in the secret compartment of a truck that has crashed down an embankment. As the crook is about to explain why he was hidden in the truck, a shot rings out from nearby woods and he is silenced forever. This leads Batman and Robin to Commissioner Gordon's office to investigate the trucking company that owned the wrecked truck, to try to figure out just why this thug was hidden away in the secret compartment. They learn that the company was recently purchased by a man named Joe







Chill. Does that name ring a bell? It doesn't for Batman, but when shown a "radio-photo" of Chill, Batman instantly recognizes him as the man who murdered his parents! After Finger spends two pages in a flashback of Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman (very similar to the origin sequence from *Detective Comics* #33), Batman and Robin return to Wayne Manor, where Batman tells Robin that he has finally discovered the identity of his parents' killer. Robin offers to assist, but Batman decides this is one case he must handle on his own.

The next day, Batman, in disguise as a truck driver, visits the "Land, Sea & Air" trucking company and tries to get a job there, but Chill refuses, stating that he will only hire people he knows. Batman, realizing that Chill is using his trucking company to smuggle crooks away from the law, devises a plan to catch Chill in the act by sending him "some business." Chill discovers that the crook Batman has sent to him for help is being followed by the Dark Knight. He guns down his "customer," claiming self-defense when Batman bursts into the room. At this point, after contemplating what to do about Chill, Batman decides on a desperate plan that might be "the end of Batman's career!" He again returns to Chill's offices and tells Chill the story of the Wayne murder, adding that Bruce Wayne can still identify him. Chill laughs at Batman, and says, "Ha! No jury would believe Wayne's identification accurate after all these years! You're bluffing! Be-

sides... How do YOU know what really happened?"

In a startling moment, Batman tears off his mask and exclaims, "I know because I am the son of the man you murdered! I AM BRUCE WAYNE!!" Batman then tells Chill that he will hound him forever. And when Chill makes a mistake he will get what he deserves. Chill, in a moment of sheer panic, runs from the room into the garage, where several of his "drivers" are playing cards. In his desperation he tells them that he needs their protection from Batman, and he explains that by killing Batman's father in the past, he created the Dark Knight. Being typical thugs, his drivers don't come to his rescue, but instead gun him down in crazed anger because each of them had at some point been apprehended and sent to prison by Batman. When they come to their senses, they realize that they did not ask Chill to tell them Batman's true identity. As he lies mortally wounded, he begins to tell them the secret. In the nick of time, Batman bursts through the door and subdues the crooks before they can discover his alter ego. Then, as Chill lies dying in Batman's arms, he says, "Funny...because I started you off as Batman, the boys...plugged me! Yeah...I guess you got me...after all!" After Chill dies, we see Batman closing the file on the Wayne murders, and the caption reads, "And so, at last the case is closed – the case without which there never would have been a Batman!" But was the case really closed?

In the last Golden Age issue of *Detective Comics* (#235, September 1956), the Wayne murder case is reopened as Finger (with art by Sheldon Moldoff), in "The First Batman," adds new elements to the origin story told eight years earlier. The story opens with Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson cleaning the attic in Wayne Manor (where was Alfred, their faithful butler?), and Dick accidentally discovering a secret drawer in an old desk. Bruce calls it his father's old desk, and they make a startling find in the secret compartment: an old "bat" costume! Bruce reasons that this must have been his father's, to which Dick says, "Then that means your father was a 'Batman' before you!" From here, Bruce's thoughts "whirl back" to the past, and Finger quickly recounts the familiar origin story, including a mention of "Joey Chill" as the killer of Bruce's parents.

Back in the present, Bruce discovers an old movie reel and a diary in the drawer where the bat costume was found. As he and Dick watch the film, they witness a party where Thomas Wayne, in the bat costume, is awarded first prize for his garb. Suddenly, thugs burst into the room looking for a doctor. After Thomas puts up a fight, the thugs threaten him with a gun, and he goes with them. The film ends at this point, and before he turns to the diary for "the rest of the story" Bruce tells Dick that the subconscious memory of his father's costume must have, in part, caused him to select the Batman as his alter ego.

Turning to the diary, Bruce learns that his father was taken by the thugs to a hideout where an in-



jured criminal needed medical attention. This criminal, a bank robber named Lew Moxon, had been shot, and he orders Thomas at gunpoint to remove a slug from his arm. Thomas, who must have been feeling like a superhero in that cool bat costume, single-handedly apprehends Moxon and his gang by tipping Moxon over in his chair and besting the rest of the thugs in a fist fight. Thomas then summons the police, and the criminals are arrested and taken to jail.

In the courtroom after Moxon is sentenced to ten years in prison, he yells at Thomas Wayne, "You did this to me! I'll get you for this, Wayne – I'LL GET YOU!" The diary moves ahead ten years and Thomas describes seeing Moxon out of prison. Moxon, still a ruthless criminal, tells Thomas that he's too smart to do the job himself, and that he'll get someone else to do it for him. The diary ends with that revelation, but Bruce reasons, "This means Joey Chill only pretended to be a hold-up man – actually he was Moxon's hired killer!"

Realizing that the man responsible for his parents' death is still at large, Batman tracks Moxon to Coastal City, where Moxon has an advertising business. Batman and Robin hop in the Batplane and fly cross-country to confront the killer. When they arrive at "Moxon Sky-Hi Advertising, Co.," they are discovered by a group of thugs, and a fight ensues in which Batman's costume is ripped to pieces (trust me, this is important later in the story). Fortunately, despite the damage to his uniform, Batman and Robin



emerge victorious. Moxon is taken to the police station, where Batman formally "charges" him with the murder of Dr. Thomas Wayne. Moxon says that he's never heard of Dr. Wayne and is willing to take a lie detector test to prove it. After Moxon passes the test with flying colors, Batman discovers that Moxon had previously suffered a head injury and must have amnesia. Pretty convenient, huh?

Batman decides that he's going to continue to "keep after" Moxon, and he discovers one of the Moxon advertising blimps being used to commit a crime. As the Dynamic Duo board the blimp and fight the crew, Batman's costume is torn even more than it was before. Although not wanting to be a shabbily dressed superhero, Batman realizes that he forgot to pack a spare costume in the Batplane. Fortunately, he had brought along his father's old costume to give him a feeling that his "father was with him on this case." At Robin's urging, Batman dons the old costume and proceeds to confront Moxon in his office. At the sight of the "original Bat-Man," Moxon's memory abruptly returns and he

exclaims, "Go away! You're dead! I had Joey Chill Kill you! Leave me alone!" As Moxon races out the door into the street hysterically screaming, "He's come back to haunt me! I've got to get away – GET AWAY!" he is mowed down by a truck and "Moxon's career of violence ends in violence."

The final act in the "Batman Origin Trilogy" comes to an end with Thomas's bat costume hanging in the trophy room in the Batcave, with a plaque inscribed, "From the Wayne Murder Case – Case finally solved by this costume once worn by the first Bat-Man." At last, Thomas and Martha Wayne could rest in peace, and the complete origin of Batman had been told!

Just think, Bill Finger's "Batman Origin Trilogy" takes place in three separate decades over the entirety of the Golden Age of Comics. While not an epic trilogy like "The Lord of the Rings," it certainly added interesting twists to the Dark Knight's origin and forever defined the character. As for Bill Finger, while he was virtually unknown in the Golden Age of Comics as the man who added so much to the genre, he finally received the recognition he deserved, and one of the premier awards for comic book writers is now called the "Bill Finger Award for Excellence in Comic Book Writing." **CN**

*Bill Jourdain has been a comics fan and collector for over 30 years and loves the Golden Age of Comics. He produces the Golden Age of Comic Books Podcast that can be found on iTunes and at his web site, <http://www.goldenagecomics.org>.*