Scott Snyder: Gotham City's New Architect

Over the past seventy-four years or so, many writers have tackled the ever-expanding mythos of the Batman, and added their own idiosyncratic perspective on a popular cultural phenomenon. Text William Proctor

From architects of the Bat, Bob Kane and Bill Finger, to creations that have since become seminal classics such as Frank Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns and Year One; Alan Moore’s The Killing Joke; Jeph Loeb’s The Long Halloween and Grant Morrison’s post-millennial stint on the character in multiple titles, Batman R.I.P, Batman and Robin: Reborn and Batman Incorporated (to name a rather select few). For a character who has been published monthly over the best part of a century, it becomes more and more arduous for writers to come up with new ingredients to add to the Chiropteran broth; yet once in a while, somebody stirs the pot and throws in a few choice flavours of their own, enriching the tapestry, salting the recipe. Scott Snyder is the latest in a long line of Bat chefs to enter the kitchen and chuck in a dash of spice and invention to a tried and tested procedure.

Snyder is very much the ‘man of the moment’ and arguably the most successful contributor to DC’s latest strategy, launched in 2011, known as ‘The New 52’. His monthly runs on Batman, Swamp Thing and now spinning out of the ‘Court of Owls’ storyline, Talon (co-written with James Tynion IV), have received rave reviews across the comic book landscape. His most recent storyline, Death of the Family, which weaves through several of the Bat books and features the return of the Joker for the first time since Tony Daniels’ Detective Comics #1 re-launch over a year ago, is viewed by many as a classic run, one which may, in time, be heralded as a seminal work by an auteur. It seems that, at the moment, whatever Snyder touches, turns to gold.

One may be forgiven for thinking that Snyder has come out of nowhere, pulled out of a seething firmament from which all great writers are moulded and shaped. Indeed, his rise from obscurity to topping Diamond Distributors’ sales chart in two short years is nothing short of meteoric. For a while, however, Snyder was destined for a rather different fate. His first foray into published writing was not in comics but in prose fiction. 2006’s Voodoo Heart, a collection of short stories and Snyder’s critically commended literary debut set the stall for what was to come; but, following that, a poor experience writing a first novel led him to contribute a piece – ‘The Thirteenth Egg’ – for an anthology of short prose fiction about original superheroes, Who Can Save Us Now? (2008).
A promotional reading captured the attention of Mark Doyle, editor of Vertigo, DC’s ‘adult’ imprint, which brought a new opportunity in the guise of an invitation to pitch an idea for a potential comic book, the result of which finally arrived in the shape of American Vampire, the first five issues of which features a back up story by none other than grand master of Horror himself, Stephen King (who had previously waxed lyrical about Voodoo Heart as a work which ‘blew him away’).

American Vampire began life as an idea for a book or perhaps a film script as Snyder did not have access to the comic book arena at the time. Having King attached to the project boosted initial interest in the series, but it was Snyder’s tale of Skinner Sweet, the titular American Vampire, which showed off his writing chops with aplomb. In a world dominated by ‘sparkly’, Byronesque romantic blood-suckers, a trend begat by Buffy and Angel then extended and further popularised by Twilight, True Blood and The Vampire Diaries, Snyder demonstrated his verve and skill by injecting a new lease of (undead) life into an exhausted sub-genre (a skill which he carried with him into the Batman universe when Gotham came calling). Rather than depicting vampires as incredibly sexy, sensuous and sensitive à la Twilight, or as a metaphorical vehicle for the underclass and social integration as in True Blood, Snyder developed an epic tale of vampire genealogy spanning over a century which portrayed vampires as the ‘undead’ beasts of lore; that is, terrifying. As Snyder states: ‘…part of the point of American Vampire is to make vampires scary again. When Skinner changes into a vampire, he’s fucking scary. You don’t want to kiss him... he does not fucking sparkle!’

American Vampire is that rare specimen that causes aspiring writers to wring their hands in disbelief, despair and envy: a debut comic book that reads like a third or fourth act, perhaps a career best. A coveted Eisner award, the comic book industry equivalent of an Oscar, a Harvey award – voted for by comic book professionals - and Snyder’s fortunes had suddenly performed a significant volte-face. Remember, a mere three years previous and he was head deep in a novel that, due to a period of turbulent economic upheaval, threatened the project from ever seeing the light of day. Following the critical triumph of American Vampire, Dan DiDio, President of DC Comics summoned a nervous Scott Snyder for a meeting to ask one question: if you could choose one comic book from DC’s rich and varied history to work on, what would it be? The answer, of course, was the Batman. Against all his expectations, Snyder boarded a train to the dark and grisly streets of Gotham.

DETECTIVE COMICS
Snyder’s stint on Detective Comics, compiled in the collected edition, Black Mirror, set the bar very high indeed. But it is Skeleton Cases, a story about Commissioner Gordon’s wayward son, James Jnr, that effectively demonstrates Snyder’s ability to operate in a narrative continuum whilst expertly tweaking Gotham’s textual architecture. This is a feature of Snyder’s writing on Batman which has garnered applause and praise across the critical circuit and remains an integral component of his tool box of narrative sleight of hand.

First introduced to comic book readers in Frank Miller’s Batman: Year One, and featuring in The Long Halloween – also set in Batman’s inaugural year of activity – James Gordon Jnr was only ever represented as a child. In Skeleton Cases, Snyder brings the character up close and personal by showing us the adult Gordon Jnr which delivers a chilling act of storytelling that sets the nerve fibres on high alert and commands the hair to stand at attention. The genre that immediately springs to mind is the thriller, even horror, rather than the superhero narrative, which comes as no surprise given the aforemen-
tioned *American Vampire* and, later, the horror mini-series *Severed* – also eerie and spooky in the classic 1970s sense of the word. For James Jnr is a sociopath; or is he?

The ‘whodunit’ perspective of *Skeleton Cases* is beautifully orchestrated as a black ballad of woe, a symphony of despair, as we witness James Senior immersed in self-doubt and insecurity. The evidence begins to stack up in his son’s favour: James Jnr has been falsely accused; he is innocent; he is my son and I have shown him no support, offered no security. We join Commissioner Gordon on his journey throughout the narrative and we, the reader, are conjoined with the father as he questions his own role in the horror that unfurls like a ticking time-bomb. The juxtaposition of story, dialogue and artwork is an exercise in aesthetic solidarity. Francesco Francavilla’s pencils carry their own stark, sombre gravitas and, rather than off-set the horror, work in conjunction with Snyder’s writing in a kind of horrific, yet sublime, noirish tragedy.

**Gates of Gotham**

*Gates of Gotham*, a five-part mini-series co-written with Kyle Higgins (who is now writing the monthly *Nightwing* comic book in ‘The New 52’), tells a story that is couched in the past and illustrates Snyder’s penchant for history as he crafts a ‘secret origin’ for one of the most enduring and remarkable characters in comics, that is, Gotham City itself. As issue one announces, ‘The Secret History of Gotham Begins Here’, and one would be forgiven for aligning this historical thriller with ‘Year One’ stories or, even, Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* feature-films, except, on this occasion, it is not the Dark Knight who is depicted in his birth throes, but the modern day City of Gotham: one half of the story is certainly *Gotham Begins* in all but name.

Spanning over a century, *Gates of Gotham* describes a city in genesis as the founding families of Gotham – the Waynes, the Cobblepots and the Elliots – collaborate to build a foundation for the future, which would become the modern day Gotham with its towering spires and vertiginous structures, a ‘city in clouds’, as the Gates brothers envision it. The story unfolds across time in both the 19th century – as Gotham’s origin story is told – and in the 21st century as Batman, Robin, Red Robin and the Black Bat race against the clock to prevent a terrorist - who aptly goes by the name ‘The Architect’ - from laying waste to the city in recompense for the betrayal of his ancestors and ‘true’ fathers of Gotham, the Gates brothers.

But reading the arc in hindsight, one becomes aware of a master-stroke of story-telling as Snyder, in conjunction with Higgins, foreshadows events to come in the post-*Flashpoint* and into ‘The New 52’ universe. Although this is not Bruce Wayne in the cape and cowl, but Dick Grayson, the original Robin and Nightwing, I cannot fail to align his words with the night-mare that will soon descend on Gotham City to challenge the Batman: ‘Just when I thought I was getting a handle on Gotham, I’m starting to realize how little I know’.

This sentiment is echoed by Tommy Elliot, the super-villain in *Hush*, who is kidnapped from Arkham Asylum by ‘the Architect’. As Grayson tries to extract necessary information from him, Elliot taunts him: ‘How can you... ever hope to protect Gotham’s future... when you’re so naïve of its past’.

While we can forgive Grayson for his lack of historical knowledge regarding Gotham – after all, he protects the streets of Blüdhaven as Nightwing not Gotham City– we may not be as forgiving if Bruce Wayne was so ignorant. Bruce Wayne or, rather, Batman, is Gotham City’s Dark Knight and protector. In many ways, Batman is Gotham City.

**The Court of Owls**

In the opening episode of ‘The New 52’ chronology, and the first chapter in Snyder’s *Court of Owls* arc, Bruce Wayne is regaling Gotham’s bourgeoisie with a speech on a new initiative to revitalise the city – to extend the work already put in place over a century earlier by the ‘first families’ detailed in *Gates of Gotham*: ‘Every Saturday, the Gotham Gazette includes a small life-styles piece called “Gotham is.” In the column, random Gothamites are asked to complete the sentence “Gotham is...” using three words or less... Here are some of the words used to describe Gotham the past few weeks: “Damned.” “Cursed.” “Bedlam.” “Murderous...” Gotham is “villainous.” Gotham is a “losing game.” Gotham is “hopeless.” Once in while, someone names one of the city’s villains as their answer to the “Gotham is” question.... someone actually tries to make the argument that the city is best reflected in its villains. For example, “Gotham is Two-Face,” meaning the Gotham is a city at odds with itself. Or “Gotham is Killer Croc.” Meaning the city is little more than a cannibalistic monster.

Of course, one of the most common answers to the “Gotham
is” question is “Batman.” “Gotham is ‘Batman’.” “Gotham is ‘Batman’s city’.” Gotham is ‘the Bat...’”

So, then, Gotham is Batman and Batman is Gotham, a symbiotic tangle of flesh and concrete, humanity and the urban, man and city. But here is where Snyder performs a coup de théâtre by taking this conceit, subverting it, and, in the process, de-stabilising the Batman from his perch as overlord and guardian of Gotham. What if the city’s throbbing heart, its DNA, its fundamental systems, beat to the sound of someone else’s drum? Someone, like the Dark Knight, hiding in the shadows, but skulking silently, camouflaged and unseen? What if Batman becomes the prey?

ENTER THE TALONS.

When a mysterious ‘John Doe’ is found with multiple knives protruding from his corpse carved with the symbol of an Athenian owl which, as Batman points out, ‘appeared on coins in Ancient Greece [as a] symbol of wealth and power’, Jim Gordon quotes an old nursery rhyme: Beware the Court of Owls, that watches all the time, ruling Gotham from a shadowed perch, behind granite and lime. They watch you at your hearth, they watch you in your bed. Speak not a whispered word of them, Or they’ll send the Talon for your head.

Batman responds: ‘I know the nursery rhyme, Jim. But the Court of Owls is just a legend.’ Gordon: ‘To be blunt, so were you for a while.’ Batman: ‘They don’t exist.’

Batman’s insistence that the Court of Owls is a nonsense, a legend, myth and ‘bedtime story’ is at the heart of the narrative as he struggles, grapples and wrestles with the fact that he might not actually know Gotham at all. He is put into a position of denial and doubt even when faced with the stark and brutal truth about the city’s secret society, ‘ruling Gotham from a shadowed perch... since colonial times.’ ‘...I’m the only legend the city needs. In many ways, it’s my oldest and truest friend. And it knows me better than anyone, just as I know it. Which is why I can say there is no Court of Owls.’

Discussing the possibility of the existence of the Court with Mayoral candidate, Lincoln March, Bruce argues that he would certainly be aware if the legend had some grain of truth: ‘Don’t you think, with my roots in the city, I’d have learned they were real long ago?’

Bruce’s cynicism and downright refusal to accept that the Court of Owls as anything but a tall tale is even challenged by those closest to him. Dick Grayson argues that ‘No one knows Gotham better than you. It’s your city. It’s Batman’s city... But it’s nearly four hundred years old, which means, over the years maybe it belonged to something else, too. Something big. Something dark.’

At the denouement of issue 4, Batman is captured by the Court of Owls and the dismantling of the Dark Knight begins in earnest. As ‘Face the Court’ (issue 5) opens, Batman has been missing for eight days. No one knows where he is, but, as we come to learn, he is a prisoner of the Court, trapped in a labyrinth where slowly, but surely, his mind is put to the test as he begins to break-down. In a hallucinatory episode, his parents visit him, claiming they had been here all along, waiting for him - before owls decimate their inside and erupt from their necks.

Snyder recognises that he is not only de-stabilising the Bat’s ontological milieu here, but is re-writing his history. Batman struggles with the notion that his mythos, his legend, is being revised as he wanders the labyrinth in existential crisis. He is not only fighting for survival, but fighting for history or, quite literally, his story. The owls are ‘trying to steal my story,’ he screams, ‘they can’t change my story.’

On a meta-textual level it is not only the Owls who threaten Batman’s story, but Snyder himself, the textual ‘architect’ who performs a radical revision and re-shifting of power in the Batman universe. Snyder is, indeed, ‘stealing’ Batman’s story, recasting all we know, as readers, outside of the text whilst also retroactively changing history within the text itself. As a result, the Dark Knight is left distraught as he questions his own position within the Gotham tradition. By the end of the story arc, Batman/ Bruce Wayne recognise that his knowledge and power has been rocked from its axis: ‘I now know that you spend your
whole life learning Gotham from deep inside...and still know nothing about it at all'.

REBUILDING GOTHAM
From his tenure on Detective Comics and the plucking of Jim Gordon’s wayward son from the past and brought into the present through the historical ‘secret origin’ of Gotham, and into the ‘Court of Owls’/‘Night of the Owls’ story-arc, Snyder is reconstructing Batman in his own image to complement and collaborate with the many voices burrowed within what Will Brooker describes as the Batman matrix. Like Bruce Wayne, Snyder is planning an architectural initiative to rebuild Gotham for the post-Millennium. Like Bruce Wayne, Snyder is also rebuilding Gotham.

It is rather difficult to create new villains with any lasting gravitas for the Batman universe given the roster of archetypes within the matrix: Two-Face, Penguin, Killer Croc, Ra’s Al Ghul, Scarecrow, et al, are all large than life and mainstays of the Batworld. For Snyder to introduce Gordon’s son so remarkably well as an original villain into the over-populated world of Gotham City’s underworld, and then to follow that up with another new nefarious ingredient, the Talons, is to be applauded – and has been. What would happen should Snyder get to play in the sandbox with an old toy?

What about the Joker?
Beginning in Batman #13 and weaving in and out of all the Bat-Family titles comes Death of the Family to answer that question. At the time of writing, the event is hitherto incomplete, but one already detects a classic in the making. The opening issue – which outsold all comics that week and is entering a fourth print run – is taut and sinister. The Joker, re-entering the ‘New 52’ universe after a year’s hiatus, attacks Gotham’s finest, the GCPD, in their own habitat, snapping the necks of law enforcement officers amidst a horrific scene transpiring in total darkness.

Snyder’s Joker is a torrent of madness, an agent of chaos, as he seeks to destroy the Bat-Family in order to emancipate his nemesis from what he sees as a comfortable nexus of relationships that have weakened Batman. For the Joker, too many bat cooks are spoiling the broth.

MAN OF STEEL
Next on Snyder’s agenda is collaboration with artist extraordinaire, Jim Lee, on Man of Steel, a new Superman book reportedly coming in mid-2013 as part of the 75th anniversary of the Last Son of Krypton. One cannot help but wonder if he can re-invigorate into the world’s oldest superhero as he did with the Dark Knight. Only time will tell, but I, for one, await the release with bated breath and expectation.

At the moment, Snyder’s touch is turning well-worn story-worlds into comic book gold emblemised through his work on Swamp Thing, the Twilight antithesis, American Vampire, and mini-series such as Severed. As he drafts new blueprints for the textual foundations of Batman, let us raise our glasses and welcome Scott Snyder, Gotham’s new architect, into the fold.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: