— *Holy 50th anniversary!*

Fighting crime through the years; new Batman movie to show at a new Bat-time in a Bat-theater near you

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Pow! Zap! Biff! Holy Blockbuster, Caped Crusader! Batman is celebrating his 50th birthday with a $40 million movie from Warner Brothers. The comic book hero, one of the century's most enduring and well-known fictional characters, has become the hottest thing in comics just as comic books are shedding the kids-only label and attracting multitudes of older readers.

The movie stars Michael Keaton as Batman/Bruce Wayne, Jack Nicholson as the Joker, Kim Basinger as reporter Vicki Vale and Billy Dee Williams as district attorney. Jack Palance and Jerry Hall are also featured. Tim Burton of "Beetlejuice" and "Pee-Wee's Big Adventure" will direct. Prince is writing several songs for the soundtrack of the movie.

Warner Brothers has already spent more than $30 million on the film, part of which was spent creating a five-block section of Gotham City that will be saved for possible sequels. The film is expected to open in June.

The Batman character was created in 1939. The creation of Superman one year earlier had spawned a whole slew of costumed imitations to satisfy the public's craze for superheroes. Yet most disappeared and none (save perhaps Wonder Woman) ever came close to equaling the popularity of Batman.

Batman was created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Batman owed more to the darker visions of Dashell Hammett and Phillip Chandler than to the almost boy-scout-pure Superman. Unlike Superman, whose primary motivation was to fight for "truth, justice and the American Way," Batman, who was only 7 when he saw his parents murdered in an apparent stick-up attempt, had sworn vengeance on all criminals. He trained his body and mind to its peak, becoming a master of disguise, as well as a detective, criminologist and scientist. He became a superb athlete and martial artist.

But Wayne was at a loss on how best to fight crime until a fateful night by a window in Wayne Manor.

"Criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot," Wayne said. "So I must wear a disguise that will strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible, a . . ." As if in answer, a winged creature flew in through the open window. "A bat! It's an omen! I shall become a bat!"

Thus he became Batman, embarking on a crimefighting career that has lasted five decades. A year later Wayne met Dick Grayson, a circus performer whose parents had also been killed by criminals. Grayson became Wayne's sidekick and, more importantly, Robin. The Dynamic Duo was born.

The Batman comic has been published continually for 50 years. Along the way, millions have become acquainted with the Batman legend. The Batcave, the Batmobile, Batboat, Batplane and even a Bathound have become part of the story. Batman's enemies are suitably colorful and well-known, with names like the Riddler, Two-Face, the Penguin, Catwoman and the Dark Knight's arch-nemesis — the Joker.

Batman and Robin have appeared in mediums other than comics. The '40s saw two fairly unsuccessful movie serials starring the Dynamic Duo. Animated versions of the Caped Crusaders were first produced in the '60s and have appeared ever since. But what is probably the most famous and popular (although not with comic readers) was the late '60s "Batman" television series.

"Batman" began production in 1966 and became the hit of the television season almost immediately. The show starred Adam West and Burt Ward as the heroes, along with a bevy of Hollywood's biggest stars as the duo's foes. Over its three seasons, such stars as Vincent Price, Art Carney, Bruce Lee, Shelly Winters, Liberace and Eli Wallach appeared in the show. It became a fad to be on the show. Familiar faces would pop up on the show all the time (usually as the Dynamic Duo was climbing up the sides of buildings).

"Batman" was campy and played strictly for laughs. The show was distinctive because it ran two nights a week in its first two seasons. The first part would end with either Batman or Robin (or both) being put in some incredibly elaborate death trap. The second part showed how they escaped (and they *always* escaped) and brought the bad guys to justice.

In its television show form, "Batman" was and is very popular. Everyone has their favorite "bit" from the show. Remember the Batpoles? The fights with POW, ZAP and BAM superimposed? And, of course, Robin's "Holy . . ." exclamations, like "Holy stratosphere!", "Holy hole in a doughnut!", "Holy one track Batcomputer mind!" and the immortal "Holy priceless collection of Etruscan snoods!"

As popular as "Batman" was to the general public, it was a great disappointment to comic readers, both past and present. These fans were often disgusted by the series' absurdity and its frequent portrayal of Batman as a bumbling hero. Even though the series had all the trappings of the Batman myths (the characters, equipment, etc.), it lacked the real spirit of the comics — the harder edge that was Batman's trademark.

The next 15 years were rather slow times for the Caped Crusader. In spite of excellent work by such noted comic authors and artists like Neal Adams and Dick Giordano, the comic became less and less popular, as did comics in general. However, the late '70s and '80s saw a marked change in his fortunes.

In the late '70s and early '80s, a comics renaissance began. Sales began to increase among the (typically) young readers as well as among older readers. This was coupled with a style of comic writing that was both more daring and more adult than ever before. Writers like Alan Moore, Frank Miller and Howard Chaykin breathed new life into what had become the cliche of the superhero. These bold, often dark visions of the superhero began to attract both critical and popular adult acclaim.

This reached its height in 1986, when two groundbreaking comic works were produced by the same company, DC Comics.

One was an often film noir look at what superheroes might really be like called "Watchmen." The other was "The Dark Knight Returns."

"The Dark Knight" series portrayed a 50-year-old Bruce Wayne in a Gotham City at the mercy of roving sociopathic gangs. Bruce Wayne had abandoned the Batman guise years earlier when the government outlawed superheroes. But faced with an almost psychotic frustration at a world gone mad, Wayne becomes the Batman one final time.

Apart from the artistic quality of the series, "Dark Knight" was noted for its reinterpretation of Batman. This was a Batman who had returned to his roots, a savage vigilante punishing the entire criminal world for the death of his parents (an image frequently repeated in the series). Batman had gone full circle — he was as concerned with vengeance as he once was with justice.

The scope of the series was impressive and garnered praise from media which had shown little interest in comics before then. Articles praising "Dark Knight" and other more adult comics appeared in Newsweek, Rolling Stone and Playboy, as well as the New York Times. More adults began to read comics and treat them as a form of literature. The comic had finally achieved respectability as a medium.

The popularity of "The Dark Knight" convinced the entertainment world that a "Batman" movie was a real possibility. Ideas and possible casting began to float around. The outline that began to form was similar to the "Superman" movies — that is, cast a relative unknown as Batman, and surround him with stars in the other roles.

Many of the comic's fans were wary of the movie at first. Most still remembered the series and feared history would repeat itself. Hope began to grow when the probable story line was revealed — it would be in the spirit of the "Dark Knight" stories, the stories many considered closer to the real idea of Batman.

But fans were devastated when the actor to play the Caped Crusader was announced . . . Michael Keaton. Mr. Mom. Beetlejuice.

The response from fans was almost totally negative, although the casting of Jack Nicholson as the Joker was met with applause. Articles ran in Newsweek and the Wall Street Journal detailing fans' anger at the decision to cast Keaton in the Batman role. Kevin Maroney, who works at Second Foundation, the main comic store in Chapel Hill, described the campus reaction as similar.

"Lamentation, wailing and gnashing of teeth," Maroney said. "Most people were worried about two things: that Keaton would not physically look the part (Keaton is a slight 5'10") as well as being worried it would be a comedy. Very few fans want to see the return of the TV show."

Warner Brothers, which needs the audience of Batman comic readers in order to have a hit, quickly attempted to reassure fans that the movie would not be a joke. Bob Kane, Batman's creator, appeared at conventions and gave interviews in which he said the movie would be serious. Many fans have adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Although plot details are scant at this point, it is definite that the boy wonder will not appear in the film. This has nothing to do with the fact that Robin has been killed in the comic but rather he is being saved for possible sequels.

Warner Brothers is optimistic about the film's chances, according to a spokesman, partly because they have had "a tremendous response from the media. There's a great interest in the film."

The company hopes to repeat its earlier success with superhero movies (Warner Brothers produced the Superman movie series), and has invested heavily in the film. However, it faces tough competition from the new Indiana Jones movie, the Ghostbusters sequel, "Lethal Weapon II," the new James Bond movie and "Star Trek V." All cater to the same audience.

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Almost natural enemies, Batman (top) and the Joker (above) will take their comic-book battles to the wide screen this summer.

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Michael Keaton (top) and Jack Nicholson (above) will star in the new "Batman" movie, to be released this June.