

Wayne Manor: 'A wish dream of two homosexuals'

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Wertham was the chief psychiatrist for the New York Department of Hospitals and an important figure among the New York City liberal intelligentsia. His writings were respected enough to help form part of the legal strategy for *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1954, Wertham published a scathing indictment of comic books, "The Seduction of the Innocent," which argued that comic books were an insidious influence on American youth, responsible for warped gender attitudes and all manner of delinquency.

Wertham's accusations garnered the attention of Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver and his Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, where Wertham repeated many of his central claims.

Batman and Robin, Wertham charged, inhabited "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together." They lived in "sumptuous quarters," unencumbered by wives and girlfriends, with only an aged butler for company. They cared for each other's injuries, frequently shared quarters, and lounged together in dressing gowns.

Worse still, both exhibited damning psychological characteristics: proclivities for cos-

tumes, dressing up, and fantasy play; secretive behavior and double-lives; little interest in women; and, most damning of all, neurotic compulsions resulting in their violent vigilantism.

Indeed, Wertham argued, depictions of Batman and Robin were frequently homoerotic, visually emphasizing Batman's rippling

physique and Robin's splayed, bare thighs.

"Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and psychopathology of sex can fail to realize the subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adven-

tures," wrote Wertham. "The Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies."

Batman's creators and writers were aghast. They noted that the character had a series of dalliances with several Gothamite ladies, even if he'd never settled down. Nor, they argued, had there ever been any explicit homosexual affection between Batman and

Robin, much less a portrayal of anything beneath their tights.

Besides, they asked, what sense did it make to interrogate the sexual practices of a character who lived only in the frames of a comic book? Any "sex life" Batman might possess was purely the imagination of his critics and had nothing to do with Batman himself. Right? Right! Imagination, as they say, is a powerful thing.

As literary critic Mark Best notes, "Wertham did correctly identify the possibility of a queer reading of the superhero, albeit as an example of what was wrong with the comics."

If Bruce Wayne was a paragon of upper-middle class white masculinity — wealthy, cultivated and amiable — his secret identity represented the dark liberation found in the lurid city cruising strange corners. Even if Batman's genitals were never portrayed coming into contact with Robin, Batman's crime-fighting lifestyle still embodied a fantasy of freedom from male familial responsibilities and, in a very real sense, from women altogether. Batman's world of the 1940s was almost exclusively male.

The few females who appeared in the pages of "Detective" were usually for show or comic relief (Bruce Wayne's earliest fiancée, Julie Madison, was frequently duped by his double-identity and played for laughs). Like many closeted men, Bruce Wayne dated

women to keep up appearances, so that no one would suspect that beneath his placid veneer lurked the sort of fellow who wrestled with criminals in dark alleys.

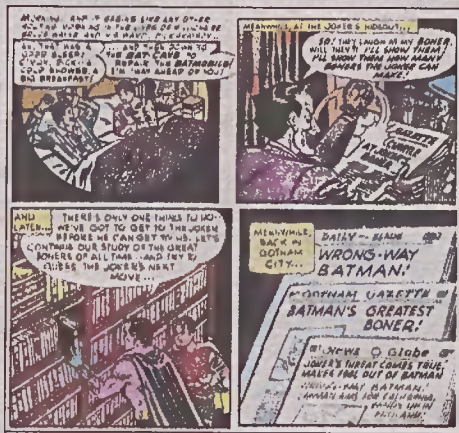
Batman vs. the Nuclear Family

At a time when social norms dictated that men and women should form nuclear families and settle into comfortable domesticity, Batman's homosocial world presented no small challenge to the "normal" family.

Of course, only a decade before the publication of "The Seduction of the Innocents" the idea of men living only with other men for the purposes of fighting other men was not just uncontroversial, but, in the midst of World War II, it was the norm. Under war conditions, soldiers lived and slept together. They depended upon one another for comfort and support, emotional and physical.

As John Ibson argues in "Picturing Men," male-male physical affection in the wartime context was normal and captured frequently in photography of the era. As Allan Berube has documented, soldiers frequently also found sexual companionship with other soldiers, often with the knowledge of — and without causing much consternation among — their peers and superiors.

The military actually did little to aggressively police male-male sexuality until the end of the war, when the branches dishonorably discharged tens of thousands of service people **see Lavender Scare on 16**



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