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Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext

Introduction

While the past few decades have seen an astonishing boom in comics theory and criticism, questions concerning the serial creation, publication, and reception of comics have rarely been at the center of analysis.¹ Indeed, the seriality of comics constitutes one of the major blind spots in the rapidly expanding field of comics studies, despite the fact that serial forms of storytelling have shaped the development of this popular medium, as well as individual formats and genres, perhaps more than any other narrative principle.² Making any kind of sweeping claims about overcoming this particular blind spot would, of course, be foolish, and to even try to answer all of the many pressing questions related to issues of seriality in comics in a single chapter would certainly be condemned to resounding failure. This is why I want to take a much more narrow focus in this chapter, a focus that will allow me to conduct a narratological analysis of serial American comic books with the degree of historical specificity and analytical scrutiny they deserve as popular artifacts that have made a significant imprint on modern American culture (and beyond).³ In fact, I will limit my inquiry rather radically to one genre and format (the superhero comic book), a single character (Batman), a specific

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- 1 An early version of this chapter was presented at the “Interdisciplinary Methodology: The Case of Comics Studies” conference in Bern on Oct. 15, 2011. I thank the organizers of the conference, Stephanie Hoppeler, Lukas Etter, and Gabriele Rippl, as well as the participants for their critical feedback. This chapter is part of my current book project “Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre” and emerges from a joint research project with Frank Kelleter in the DFG-Research Unit “Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice” (Göttingen).
 - 2 Recent publications such as Heer and Worcester 2009, Eder, Klar, and Reichert 2011, and Smith and Duncan 2012 do not offer any systematic analysis of seriality in comics. On the phenomenon of popular seriality, see the essays in Kelleter 2012; on comics as a popular medium, see Stein, Ditschke, and Kroucheva 2009.
 - 3 This focus is sanctioned by the early emergence and cultural significance of American comic strips and superhero comic books, both of which are prime examples of popular serial storytelling. See also Stein, Meyer, and Edlich 2011.

time period (the 1940s to the 1960s), and one particular element of the narrative apparatus (paratextual constructions of author fictions and negotiations of their functions). This does not mean, of course, that attempts to trace different forms of serial storytelling throughout American comics history are necessarily futile.⁴ It is also not intended to suggest that questions of seriality and authorship could not be addressed in the contexts of other comics traditions.⁵ And it should not be taken to imply that it would be impossible to develop a transcultural or transnational theory of graphic narratives and comics authorship.⁶ What it does signal, however, is that if we want to take comics seriously not just as serial narratives but as cultural objects that exert agency—as objects that make others do things—we must be willing to zero in on the very specific mechanisms through which particular comics have generated specific author fictions and functions at particular moments in time. Narratological analysis, in my view, is most convincing when it minds the historicity of the narratives and artifacts it studies. Rather than merely asking on a formal level how narratives and artifacts communicate meaning, we must also ask what kinds of cultural work they perform: not just what they are, but also what they do and how they do it; which meanings they enable at concrete historical moments and how they participate in the very creation of what we call history and culture.⁷

As the phrase ‘make others do things’ indicates, I take a central cue from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, especially the suggestion that objects have agency: that they are not only employed by human actors but that they themselves make specific actions possible or impossible, likely or unlikely, thinkable or unthinkable. I also subscribe to Latour’s notion that we should “follow the actors,” human as well as non-human, and let them “deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed” (2005: 79, 68). I do so because I believe that popular serial narratives have a profound tendency to develop their own theories of seriality.⁸ In that sense, I view the superhero comic book not as what Latour perceives as an “intermediary” that simply “transports, transfers, [or] transmits” creative content, genre conventions, and information

4 For a successful attempt, see Gardner 2012. On serial comic strips, see also Hayward 1997: ch. 2; Kelleter and Stein 2009; on serial comic books, see Eco 2004 [1962]; Dittmer 2007; Wüllner 2010; Denson 2011; Kelleter and Stein 2012; Stein 2013b.

5 See Becker 2010; Saika 2011.

6 See Ecke 2013; Stein 2013a, 2013b. On the transnational exchanges that have shaped American comics, see Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013.

7 On the notion of cultural work, see Tompkins 1986; on the cultural work of superhero comics, see Kelleter and Stein 2012.

8 For a more elaborate treatment of the theory of popular seriality, see the introduction to Kelleter 2012.

about authors without affecting them, but as an active “mediator,” “an original event” that always “creates what it translates” (1993: 77-78). I maintain that superhero comic books actively participate in the construction of their narrative apparatus because they “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, [or] forbid” (Latour: 2005: 72) specific ways in which a series propels itself toward ever new iterations and variations of an accumulating archive of stories in search of expanding readerships. As such, comics “provide a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act” (Latour 2005: 55), including practices and mediations of comics authorship that emerge from evolving conflicts over who is authorized to create legitimate new installments of an ongoing series.⁹

As Michel Foucault has famously argued, our understanding of authorship generally results from “specific discursive practices” that create “systems of valorization” whereby the “relationship [...] between an author and a text [...] and] the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it” (2001 [1969]: 1622, 1623) is continually managed and authorized. Foucault does not talk specifically about popular culture, of course, and he certainly does not have in mind the kind of multi-authored, monthly issued, and decade-spanning type of serial storytelling that has shaped the history of American superhero comic books when he suggests that the discursive construction of authorship performs a particularly significant function for serial texts. But when he notes that the author “constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, and outside influence” and that this “author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts” (Foucault 2001 [1969]: 1630), he does point to one important function of authorship discourses that is particularly significant for popular forms of serial storytelling: to stabilize the inherently unstable project of narrative continuation from installment to installment and to answer the conflicting desires for authorial unity and heterogeneous author figures behind proliferating, sprawling, and often contradictory narrative styles and contents.

We thus encounter a nexus between the sprawling potential of serial storytelling and discourses of authorship as a means of managing the narrative consequences of this sprawl. In his narratological assessment of popular genre stories, Umberto Eco connects this nexus with the generative principle of serial storytelling: the “dialectic between order and

⁹ Studies of comics authorship include Brooker 2001, 2012; Carpenter 2005; Stein 2009; Gabilliet 2010; Williams and Lyons 2010; Zani 2010; Smith 2012; Uidhir 2012. An early, largely biographical example, is Sheridan 1942.

novelty, [...] between scheme and innovation,” or repetition and variation (1990: 91). While Foucault largely marginalizes the role of the reader, Eco’s model distinguishes between two types of readers: the ‘naïve’ and the ‘smart’ reader. The naïve reader is “the victim of the strategies of the author who will lead him little by little along a series of provisions and expectations”; the smart reader “evaluates the work as an aesthetic product” and “enjoys the seriality of the series” by recognizing its narrative strategies (1990: 92). While this distinction may be criticized on different levels, it is obviously short-sighted when it comes to popular forms of serial storytelling and their reception. For one, I would argue that the very dynamic of repetition and variation that structures serial storytelling also structures the reading practices through which followers of superhero comics and other types of serial narratives make meaning. More often than not, the serial reader is both naïve and smart at the same time (though perhaps to varying degrees), appreciating the repetitiveness of an ongoing series and enjoying the familiarity of certain characters, settings, drawing styles, and story structures as much as treasuring the variations, additions, and revisions that keep a series interesting and allow it to move forward.

Secondly, Eco’s reader tends to be someone who merely consumes a series and has little impact on its continuing production: “The series consoles us (the consumers) because it rewards our ability to foresee: we are happy because we discover our ability to guess what will happen,” he alleges, noting further:

We do not attribute this happy result to the obviousness of the narrative structure but to our own presumed capacities to make forecasts. We do not think, “The author constructed the story in a way that I could guess the end,” but rather, “I was so smart to guess the end in spite of the efforts the author made to deceive me.” (1990: 86)

Today’s aficionados of popular seriality are usually much more advanced than this statement implies, evaluating not just the seriality of a series but also reflecting and commenting on their own significance as consumers and commentators whose actions have consequences for a series’ continuation. Thus, today’s serial readers are generally aware of their double position as simultaneously (and willingly) naïve and smart readers, acting as the kinds of “amateur narratologists” that Jason Mittell (2006: 38) has discussed in the context of contemporary serial American television and as producers of their own discourses and creators of (serial) artifacts. As such, readers of popular serial stories frequently seek to transcend their status as largely passive recipients and actively comment,

question, and challenge ongoing series in order to participate in their future development.¹⁰

Superhero comics do not just allow such readerly activism; their serial production and reception necessitates and thrives on such activism. Comic books are active mediators in the Latourian sense, then, because they raise very particular questions: Who can legitimately author an ongoing series? Who can authoritatively interpret a series' history? Who can propose dominant interpretations of its current state? As I will explain below, comic books have developed their very own set of answers, too. One such answer relates to the ways in which comic book series negotiate fictions and functions of authorship. If we agree with Foucault that discursive constructions of comic book authorship orchestrate relations between serial texts and their producers in ways that create an overarching sense of serial cohesiveness and continuity, then we must venture beyond Eco's differentiation between naïve and smart readers in favor of a more active understanding of comics readership and a more dynamic notion of comics authorship.

Such a critical maneuver is supported by Jared Gardner (2012), who proposes that comics generally motivate heightened degrees of authorial engagement *and* reader involvement. Discussing the sequential spacing of comic narratives and their amalgamation of images and words, Gardner notes the 'unique affordances' through which comics involve their readers in active processes of meaning making. Comics "depend on and privilege an audience not only projecting its own storytelling into the text but also always potentially picking up a pen [...] and creating the story themselves" (2012: xiii). Readers are usefully conceived as always potential and sometimes actual authors here, but what goes unmentioned is a particular space in comic books that has functioned as a prime mediator in the construction, negotiation, and authorization of comics authorship: the space between the actual comic book stories themselves (i.e., the text into which readers project their own ideas by imaginatively filling in the gutter spaces between panels or by working the interface between words and images) and the world outside of the comic book, where readers may draw their own comics or create their own comic-book related stories.

10 Examples of smart readers of serial entertainment who reflect on their double position as willingly naïve consumers of popular culture and as smart readers of cultural artifacts who turn their readings into creative commentary about these artifacts are the producers of Batman and Spider-Man video spoofs that highlight the work of amateur narratology. For further analysis, see Stein 2012.

G rard Genette (1997: 1-2, original emphases) labels this space the paratext and defines it as follows:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or [...] a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside [...]. Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*.”

It is this very transaction at the fringes of the text, at this diffuse space of uncertain authorial legitimization and ambiguously authorized expression that has functioned as a particularly significant mediator in the evolution of the American superhero comic book.

Of course, paratextual transactions have been prominent in American serial narration since at least the nineteenth century, when city mysteries, magazine fiction, and dime novels were among the most widely received and most heavily negotiated publications, and when, at the tail end of the century, newspaper comic strips emerged in the pages of mass-printed tabloid newspapers. Even in the twentieth century, comic strips, film serials, and science fiction magazines thrived on the ability to turn their textual fringes into productive contact zones between producers and consumers, authors and readers. And while these productive transactions are certainly not limited to the realm of popular culture, they profit from the relatively low entry level that popular publications offer to their readers. After all, pretty much anybody can ask questions about a plot development or character trait and make suggestions about future installments he or she wishes to see. It is true that, as stories accumulate and paratextual discourses acquire their own histories, such questions and suggestions must generally display a certain amount of series knowledge and reading competence in order to be taken seriously, but I would still argue that writing a letter to an editor about a comic book differs substantially in terms of the cultural capital necessary to establish a legitimate claim from critiquing a modernist poem or avantgarde painting habitually invested with the auratic powers of high art. Moreover, it is the very seriality of comic books that tends to trigger such responses. Serial storytelling means serial reading, which, in turn, entails a heightened emotional (because continued, invested, and always tenuous) engagement with ongoing stories and expanding storyworlds as well as a sense of intimacy between readers and texts that stems from the close integration of serial narratives into the personal lives and lifeworlds of their dedicated readers.¹¹

11 See especially Kelleter 2011.

Paradigmatic examples from the realm of American superhero comic books are the editorials and letter columns that have offered instructions and discussions about how to read and author serial comics. These paratextual spaces not only allow for, but actually necessitate, ongoing and indeed serial debates about plot developments, the gestation of complex narrative universes (or storyworlds¹²), specific aspects of setting (from Metropolis to Gotham in DC Comics¹³), the evolving characterization of superheroes and villains,¹⁴ and themes from the rather simple good vs. evil stories of the genre's early years to the morally conflicted narratives of the darker graphic novel period since the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵ Moreover, such spaces have generated extensive exchanges between the official comic book producers, represented, for instance, by the company logo, superhero trademark, copyright notices, authorial signatures, and editorial commentary, and the receivers of the stories, those who buy and read the magazines and frequently become active participants in the serial construction of comic book narratives by writing letters to the editor, producing fanzines, and thus claiming authorial competences themselves.

Authorial Origin Stories: From Peritext to Epitext

American comic books possessed a rather low cultural esteem and were associated with notions of cheap entertainment and assembly-line production throughout the first few decades of their existence. From the beginning, however, their producers counteracted the widespread assumption that what they offered to their readers in monthly installments were merely formula stories told by anonymous, insignificant authors.¹⁶ When the first Batman story appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939), for instance, it signaled its authorship status through a "Rob't Kane" signature on the first page as well as the company logo and the title of this popular series on the cover. But *Batman* #1 (spring 1940) already communicated a more complex notion of authorship, indicating that the

12 On fictional universes and transmedia storyworlds, see Ryan and Thon 2014; on managing and authoring vast serial narratives, see Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2009.

13 Setting generally functions as a spatial anchor for continued investments with, and debates about, ongoing stories, authorial collaborations, and comics reception. See Uricchio 2010.

14 For narratological explorations of fictional characters, see Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider 2010.

15 On the different phases of the superhero genre, see Klock 2003; Jenkins 2010; for different approaches to the genre history of the American superhero comic, see Coogan 2006; Duncan and Smith 2009; Lopes 2009; Ndalianis 2010. For a film- and television-centered analysis of authorial paratexts, see Gray 2010.

16 On superhero comics as formula stories, see Blythe and Sweet 2002.

series had gained a readership specifically interested in this superhero, his history, and his creators. Here, then, the notion of comic book authorship solidifies, and author fictions begin to take center stage: a “Bob Kane” signature is displayed on the actual cover of the comic book. Inside, readers are introduced to Batman’s origin story, which supplies the character with the childhood trauma—the murder of his parents—that will motivate his endless fights against crime. As writer and editor Dennis O’Neil once observed, “The origin is the engine that drives Batman” (Pearson and Uricchio 1991: 25), and in order to be fully effective, this engine must be fueled by repeated iterations and revised reiterations of its basic elements: by the kinds of novelties, variations, and innovations that Eco locates at the roots of all forms of serial storytelling and that proliferate prodigiously in the realm of popular seriality.

If serial characters are driven by evolving origin stories, comics authorship is indebted to its very own tales of origin. In *Batman #1*, Bob Kane is introduced as the “creator of THE BATMAN!” in a one-page biography titled “Meet the Artist!” (see figure 1). This biography is the first of many following paratextual projections of Batman’s authorship. The photograph of Kane that shows him at work at the drawing board in his studio provides readers with an image of where and by whom the stories are created. Kane looks directly at the camera and thus also at the reader, intimating a potentially personal relationship between author and reader: “READERS, meet Bob Kane,” the opening sentence states. Here, then, the author is not merely implied, but verbally described and visualized rendered.¹⁷ This author biography further emphasizes the originality of Kane’s creation, seeking to preempt any discussion of Kane as a popular copycat—of DC’s earlier and massively successful Superman, for instance, or of comic books more generally as a mass-produced form of storytelling assembled from a smorgasbord of cultural sources (film serials, movies, newspaper strips, pulp fiction, and so forth): “Bob is certainly not a copyist; his work shows a definite originality and freshness.” Thus, the text mixes a romantic notion of inspired authorial creativity with an understanding and public acknowledgement of comic book production as a skilled, and speedy, artisanal process that leads to a marketable and thus successfully novel, or fresh, product.

17 Gardner (2012: 74–75) discusses a similar biographical piece about Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster from *Superman 1* (summer 1939). The ambiguity of Wayne C. Booth’s implied author concept as “an intentional product of the author in or qua the work or [...] an inference made by the recipient about the author of the work” (Kindt and Müller 2006: 8) foregrounds the diffusely authorized and negotiated nature of emerging projections of comic book authorship. Most of the sources I will cite throughout this chapter are not paginated; in order to increase readability, I cite page numbers when available but omit all “n.p.” references.

MEET THE ARTIST!

READERS, meet Bob Kane, creator of THE BATMAN! Realizing that people like to know something about the men who draw their favorite cartoon-strips, we induced Bob to sit down at a typewriter and dash off a few pertinent facts about his life. He complained that a drawing-board—and not a typewriter—was his natural means of artistic expression, but he did manage to hammer out a sort of synopsis about himself.

On top of that, we felt that we should have a picture of Bob to grace this page. We asked him to bring us one. "Sure," he said. "I'll take care of that." But as the days went by, and publication date came nearer and nearer, we still had no picture. Finally we had to sit Bob down at a drawing board, hold him there until a photographer could be called in from another floor of the building—and we finally got our picture!

Bob Kane was born twenty-four years ago in New York City, and has spent most of his life in the big town. As you might expect, his primary interest has always been in drawing. His work has appeared in a long list of national magazines. For some time Bob was a straight "comic" artist, specializing in drawings of a humorous nature. When the trend swung toward the adventure type of drawing, Bob was quick to see that therein lay his future, and though the abrupt change in drawing technique necessitated plenty of hard labor on his part, the phenomenal success of THE BATMAN is proof enough that Bob was capable of making the transition. It hasn't been easy, and it isn't easy even now. Anyone who thinks a comic artist has an easy life should take a look at Bob Kane's working-schedule. It's an unusual week which doesn't find Bob at the drawing board on seven consecutive days. The saving grace about it all is the fact that he enjoys his work, though he does admit that he might like to have a

little vacation come summer—three days in a row, or something like that.

Bob has spent a good deal of time in the North woods, hunting and fishing (before THE BATMAN took up all his time, of course). He loves outdoor life in all its phases. For a time he worked as seaman on a boat plying South American waters, and he says that he feels that this contact with all sorts of people, plus the satisfaction of seeing parts of the world absolutely foreign to the environment of New York, has been of great help to him in humanizing the characters which he draws.

Bob is certainly not a copyist; his work shows a definite originality and freshness which has attracted many fervent fans. He studies

constantly, striving always to improve his work. If he has a free hour or two, he is very likely to spend it at one of the local medical colleges studying anatomy, for he well realizes that only by a thorough knowledge of bone and muscle structure is an artist able to inject into his drawings the true expression of action and motion which is so necessary to this type of art.

Bob Kane has worked hard, is still working hard, and will continue to work hard to give you just the sort of thing which you have come to expect in THE BATMAN. We predict ever-increasing success for both the artist and the creation of his facile pen. And they both deserve that success!

—THE EDITOR



Figure 1: *Batman* #1 (spring 1940). © DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Comic book authors are geniuses, according to this biography, precisely because they can produce riveting stories and fascinating superhero figures fast and thus supply their readers with a steady flow of satisfactory entertainment. What is more, the focus of this biography may be on Kane as a comics creator, but the tone and narrative perspective complicate the image of singular authorial creation. While Kane “did manage to hammer out a sort of synopsis about himself,” the text is actually written by a self-identifying “editor” who “induced” Kane to “dash off a few pertinent facts about his life” and then converted the autobiographical raw material into a biographical peritext.¹⁸ This process mirrors the way in which the comics themselves were produced, with writers and artists hammering out serial stories and editors authorizing the final versions for their “many fervent fans” (whose status as “fans” elevates them from the role of mere consumers by casting them as particularly dedicated and loyal connoisseurs).¹⁹ While the notion of collaborative production is implied, the twin fictions of superhero origins and singular authorial creation remain largely intact, even though readers are signaled that comics authors are hired and inspired professionals who work fast in order to meet, and ideally supersede, the expectations of both their editors and their readers.

Only a few years later, a second origin story extended these authorial projections. The serial superhero’s growing narrative universe apparently called for an expanding universe of authorship as well. What was a surprising new bestselling product in 1940 had evolved into a mainstream genre read by large segments of the American population only a few years later. While Batman’s origins and Kane’s biography had been presented as two distinct pieces in *Batman* #1 (the hero’s textual origins being supplemented with the author’s peritextual origin story), “The True Story of Batman and Robin: How a Big-Time Comic Is Born!” in *Real Fact Comics* #5 (Nov.–Dec. 1946) synthesized them into one extended comic book origin story (see figure 2). According to Genette’s nomenclature, the *Real Fact Comics* book was part of the superhero’s epitext since it was not

18 On the distinction between peritext (material surrounding the text proper within the same artifact) and epitext (material closely connected with a text but printed outside of the artifact in question), cf. Genette 1997: 344.

19 The distinction between reader and fan is important since the majority of comic book buyers have been readers whose involvement in comics culture did not necessarily extend beyond acts of purchasing, reading, perhaps collecting and discussing comics with friends. Fans tend to be more active, for instance, by writing letters to editors, organizing and attending conventions, producing fanzines, hosting comics-related websites, and so forth. Historically, however, American comics readers have been particularly active and highly organized as fans. See Sabin 1993: ch. 5; Pustz 1999; Brown 2001; for an insider’s view, see Schelly 1999; on fandom cultures more generally, see Jenkins 1992, 2006; Hills 2002.



Figure 2: “The True Story of Batman and Robin: How a Big-Time Comic Is Born!”
Real Fact Comics #5 (Nov.–Dec. 1946). © DC Comics. All rights reserved.

materially appended to the Batman comic books but nonetheless part of Batman's wider cosmos. The extension from text (Batman's origin story) and peritext (the author biography in *Batman #1*) to the epitext of *Real Fact Comics* follows a central dynamic of popular serial storytelling, where proliferating stories, characters, and settings are accompanied by an increasing demand for author fictions that contain the potentially unruly sprawl of serial narration. Long-running serial narratives usually generate not only vast narrative universes and intersecting storyworlds (multiverses) but also metaverses that organize the proliferating information by establishing classificatory systems, critical terminologies, popular canons, and powerful author fictions.²⁰

"The True Story of Batman and Robin: How a Big-Time Comic Is Born!" depicts Kane as a comics figure behind the drawing board. He is presented as an artist working within a specific setting (his studio) and institutional structure (the offices of DC Comics). In addition, the notion of collaborative production no longer remains implied. The narrative refers to the "expert editorial guidance" Kane had received when he first created *Batman*, and readers actually get to see a comic book rendition of an editor. While Kane had already been described as an employee of DC Comics in *Batman #1*, he is now much more clearly shown as one creative element in the larger production structures at DC Comics whose work must be approved by an editor wielding a substantial degree of control over it. After all, "The True Story of Batman and Robin" is not an autobiographical comic; it was drawn by Win Mortimer, and the narrative perspective is explicitly authorial, rather than first-person: "Let us drop in at the studio of talented young Bob Kane." Furthermore, the offer to collaborate in the serial storytelling is made explicit in a scene that directly authorizes readers as serial authors. In this scene, readers learn that the suggestion that had allegedly sparked off the creation of Batman's teenage sidekick Robin had come from a fan who had expressed his desires in a personal letter to Bob Kane: "I would like to see Batman have a partner ... someone who can share the secret of his identity." Finally, Batman and Robin appear as characters on the same storyworld level as Bob Kane but also as fictional comic book characters in the comic strip he draws. On the story level, they meet their creator, who has left his extratextual position as a comics artist and has transformed into a comics character. When Batman and Robin thank Kane "for bringing us to life" and Kane thanks the fans "for your interest and wonderful friendship," the comic book paratext (or epitext, in this case) is publicly acknowledged as the place where authorial and readerly projections must vie for the

20 See Kelleter and Stein 2012.

legitimization of the whole discursive community involved in the production and reception of a superhero comic and where every decision concerning a series must be publicly authorized.

Letter Pages as Serial Paratexts: Authorizing Comics Authorship

As my remarks about *Batman* #1 and *Real Fact Comics* #5 have indicted, questions of authorship and the authorization conflicts they generate with particular force in the realm of serial popular culture appeared early on in the history of the superhero genre.²¹ But they attained a new dimension with the introduction of letter columns in the late 1950s and 1960s, a time when an older generation of readers began to embrace superhero comics as a serial genre whose history was worth preserving by amassing collections, creating archives, researching backstories, reconstructing production histories, and developing a critical vocabulary with which the merits and weaknesses of particular works, authors, and the genre at large could be adequately discussed.²² In Foucault's nomenclature, one function of comic book authorship, publicly debated and eventually fully credited, was to create 'systems of valorization' according to which particular styles and stories could be attributed to individual creators, criticized, and, over time, canonized. Such heightened reader involvement was enabled and amplified by the "Letters to the Bat-Cave" section, which first appeared in *Batman* #125 (Aug. 1959) and functioned as an authorial mediator, reshaping the nature of comic book authorship by fostering the projection of new author fictions. The letters page implemented the notion that readers could and should act upon their desire to project their ideas from the extratextual world into the material space of the comic book by entering the printed paratextual discourse about their favorite series at a time when all Batman stories were still officially signed by Bob Kane.²³

21 On authorization conflicts in superhero comics, see Kelleter and Stein 2012; for a general view, see Bennett 2005: ch. 2; Donovan, Fjellestad and Lundén 2008.

22 As serially produced artifacts, comic books encourage practices of collecting, archiving, and canonizing. See Gardner 2012: ch. 5 as well as Henry Jenkins's analysis (in this volume) of the archival, ephemeral, and residual practices triggered by serial comics. In the context of the Batman series, the epochal change was signaled by DC's introduction of a revamped "New Look" Batman.

23 In *Detective Comics*, the parallel series that featured Batman stories, the letters pages appeared later (#327, May 1964). My investigation takes off from Brooker's reading of DC's letter columns in the 1960s. Brooker speaks of DC's "cultivation of [an] 'authorship' discourse" and concludes that "[t]he boundaries between comic author and fan, writer and reader, have always been thin and often dissolve entirely" (2001: 253). I conducted my research on the *Batman* letter columns of the 1960s in the Comic Art Collection at

The very first letter column in *Batman* #125 begins with a reader's comment. "I've been a BATMAN fan for many years," Larry Graff writes, "and I would like to make a suggestion. How about a page of letters for your readers?" Such a page "would give readers a chance to make suggestions of their own." The answer—"We agree with you, Larry, and so do many of your fellow BATMAN fans, who have suggested the same idea to us"—is supplied by a nameless editor who will, from now on, play the role of the moderator always at the service of his audience.²⁴ The existence of this letter and the fact that DC printed it as the opening salvo in an ensuing exchange between comic book producers and consumers makes a compelling argument about the evolution of the superhero genre from the 1940s, when comic book communication was largely directed at readers, to the 1960s, when this communication begins to flow back and forth between comic book producers and their readers. As a long-running superhero series, *Batman* now has a history, and this history can be explored and discussed by dedicated readers whose long-term reading practices will eventually aggregate into consolidated forms of comics fandom and whose activities will no longer remain confined to the act of reading. Graff's letter, in that sense, constitutes a paratextual practice in a double sense: it transforms Graff from a reader into a published author (if only of a fan letter), and it announces an officially sanctioned notion of reader participation in DC's serial storytelling. The letter columns will, from now on, function as a public forum in which readers may make suggestions about their favorite series, and while the letter discourse will generally be controlled by those who publish the comics (a point that is not specified in the editorial response, for obvious reasons), it will afford readers a say—or the feeling of having a say—in the future course of *Batman* (Graff's phrase "of their own" further signals a sense of ownership earned through the repeated purchase and reading of comic books).

If the letter columns transformed readers into authors of letters and implied co-authors of future stories, they also turned editors into readers of fan mail.²⁵ Questions such as "what's your favorite, fans?" (*Batman*

Michigan State University in July 2011 and want to thank Randy Scott for his generous help and advice.

24 Superman comics had featured letters since 1958. Gabilliet suggests that the introduction of letter columns created "a new type of proximity between readers and publishers" (2010: 53). DC editors like Mort Weisinger, Jack Schiff, and Julius Schwartz, who encouraged fan practices like letter writing and fanzine publication, had themselves been part of science-fiction fandom in the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Gabilliet 2010: 53).

25 Brooker notes that "the two concepts of comic book 'author' and 'fan' evolved in tandem" (2001: 249). Brown views comic book readers as "active textual participants [...] organize[d] into loosely structured interpretive communities" (2001: 58). The creators of continuity newspaper comic strips such as Sidney Smith (*The Gumps*) and Milton Caniff

#150, Sept. 1962) and “what’s your choice, reader?” (*Batman* #151, Nov. 1962) were significant because they communicated a strong sense of collaborative stewardship by comic book producers who publicly believed that they would benefit from the mutual exchange of ideas—however contrived or manipulative such publicly expressed notions may have actually been—that was to shape much of the discourse in the letter columns.²⁶ What is more, the editor occasionally delegated his editorial authorities: “This is your department, with a minimum of editorial interference,” we read in *Batman* #190 (Mar. 1967); “make this page your own”; “what would you do if you were the editor of *Batman*?”; “It’s your right to write, [...] so don’t muff out on this [...] chance to break into print,” we learn in *Batman* #189 (Feb. 1967). These calculated rhetorical gestures are obviously part of a marketing strategy rather than actual transpositions of editorial power, but they have consequences: they invoke a reader who has a right to be a published author and potential editor—a right that, once granted, can and will also be legitimately demanded.²⁷

The authorship discourse in the “Letters to the Bat-Cave” column began with relatively simple assertions such as “Bob Kane must have had a job on that one” (*Batman* #163, May 1964) or “a John Broome sounding title—right?” (*Batman* #167, Nov. 1964). But it quickly morphed into detailed discussions of individual styles and authorial voices that were informed by the writers’ personal interaction with DC editors outside of the official letter columns as well as within the pages of specific fanzines.²⁸ As a letter by Mike Friedrich that appeared in *Batman* #181 (June 1966) indicates, readers eagerly displayed the expert and inside knowledge that only years of reading comic books and investigating their production

(*Terry and the Pirates*) had been especially apt at cultivating a public and private exchange with their followers. See Hayward 1997: ch. 2; Gardner 2012: ch. 2.

- 26 Marvel took its own approach to authorship negotiations, including Stan Lee’s editorials (“Stan’s Soapbox”) as well as celebrations of Marvel’s bullpen (the fictionalized space in which Marvel writers, artists, and other employees worked) in the “Marvel Bullpen Bulletins.” These peritexts painted portraits of the Marvel staff and the doings at the bullpen that treated comic book producers as part of an extended cast of comic book characters whose quasi-superheroic powers allegedly allowed them to create the best comics on the market. The editorials are collected in Cunningham 2009; for analysis, cf. Pustz 1999: 48–60; see also Kelleter and Stein 2012.
- 27 Some of the letters were certainly invented by DC staff; we also know very little about the criteria for the selection of actual letters. Cf. Barker: “[L]etters are selected, and often for early editions solicited or ghostwritten. They are not produced by some ‘natural sampling’ of readers’ responses. [...] They are a part of the self-image of the comic. They present that self-image, and help to encourage the right kind of future response from readers” (1989: 47).
- 28 The *Alter Ego* fanzine featured letters from writers like Otto Binder and Gardner Fox, artists like Kurt Schaffenberger, and editors like Mort Weisinger in its own letter columns. Cf. Thomas and Schelly 2008: 138–39.

processes could garner in order to distinguish themselves from less knowledgeable followers:

I'm sure a new writer has joined the *Batman* bullpen. The style of writing is completely different from either Fox, Herron, or Broome, the three mainstays. It might be the veteran Bill Finger, but I doubt it. The story had everything that *Batman* needs to have a story that clicks: (1) Plenty of action; (2) very good art; (3) practically a pun per panel; (4) very good supporting characters; (5) a good, though not outstanding villain. My guess for the authorship is Nelson Bridwell.

Friedrich speaks as an educated interpreter, critic, and chronicler of Batman comics here, as someone who can tell a veteran writer not officially credited in DC's comics (Finger, in this case) apart from newer writers like Nelson Bridwell. Another letter writer, Ken Hodl, puts a name to the back-and-forth about the authorship of *Batman* in the same issue:

Guess the author, eh? Well, I have some sneaky suspicions but I'll go about it in a scientific manner. Since it's not Fox, Finger, Broome, or Herron, it would have to be either Kanigher, Hamilton, or Drake. I will rule out Arnold Drake for the reason that the story was a bit too wild, as far as violence is concerned. Mr. Drake also lacks the reality in his stories which this one had in tremendous proportions. Edmond Hamilton [...] and Robert Kanigher are both likely suspects, but with Kubert (who does most of his fine work for RK) doing some *Batman* covers now, I'd just have to put my money down on Robert Kanigher.

These are the paratextual beginnings of an authorship discourse that ventures beyond merely identifying specific creators. The letter writer's "scientific manner" points to the recognition of individual drawing styles and authorial voices.²⁹ And if the comics were no longer seen as being produced by a singular "Bob Kane" but by a heterogeneous group of collaborators whose input could be recognized and judged on the basis of its artistic merits or entertaining qualities, several new practices beyond the mere reading of comics become feasible: devising portraits of, and conducting interviews with, individual writers and artists; lobbying for the assignment of particular authors and artists to specific story arcs; criticizing some creators and celebrating others and thereby privileging certain story developments while disavowing others, and so forth. In the 1960s and 1970s, these practices facilitated the emergence of comic book fandoms (including comic book conventions) and a budding fanzine culture that would morph into professionalized forms of comics journalism such as *The Comics Journal*, *Amazing Heroes*, or *Wizard* by the 1980s and 1990s and finds its expression in today's digital environment of online blogs, websites, and forums, not to mention the massive popularity of comics conventions such as the annual San Diego Comic-Con.

²⁹ For a more skeptical view, cf. Brooker 2001: 257–58.

All of these practices make themselves heard in the letters, and they suggest an increase in self-proclaimed authority among those who read and write about comics. “I consider myself a fairly good authority on *Batman*,” Mike Friedrich writes in *Batman* #166 (Sept. 1964), a claim that is publicly rewarded when he crosses the paratextual threshold from being a letter writer operating in the border zone between the world outside of the comic book and its textual inside by becoming the actual author of one of the stories in *Batman* #200 (Mar. 1968).³⁰ This border-crossing role-reversal is remarkable as it represents a serious case of adolescent wish fulfillment, an act of authorial empowerment that is preordained by years of fictional comic book stories depicting the metamorphosis from ordinary human being to superhuman hero. The socially unobtrusive fan is magically transformed into his second-ultimate dream fantasy. He may not have become a superhero, but he has established himself as the next best thing: the author of superhero stories. Friedrich, for instance, was hired by DC Comics in the late 1960s and moved on to become a writer for Marvel a few years later. This transformation is possible because long-running serial stories pose a central problem to any author, however officially legitimated or institutionally authorized: how to master the steadily growing history of a series, its often convoluted plot developments and expanding character constellations, as well as changes in style, tone, and setting, so as to be able to produce convincing, legitimate, and authoritative new installments. In other words, comic book authors have to be avid readers, if not fans, and even then, they will have a hard time competing with the collective knowledge of comic book readers. In addition, over the years, the most dedicated readers will amass a collective serial memory, with detailed knowledge about the most arcane elements of the series’ past, and they may also acquire skills that qualify them either as authors of future stories or as apt critics of the ongoing serial storytelling.

With readers like Friedrich and the many others who wrote letters, published fanzines, and organized (or at least attended) comic book conventions, it was no longer feasible for superhero comics to tell simple episodic stories. The 1960s therefore saw the emergence of a new serial form of storytelling. If earlier stories had largely taken place in an “oneiric climate” (Eco 2004 [1962]: 153) in which previous stories had no or only little consequence for present and future installments, they now attain a serial memory, increasingly feature longer story arcs, and connect the

30 Friedrich’s transformation from reader to author is mentioned in the author credits and in the last panel of “The Cry of Night Is ‘Sudden Death!’” as well as on the final page of the comic book, which features a “Dialogue Between Two Batmaniacs Upon *Batman* Reaching Issue 200” (Friedrich and fanzine editor Biljo White).

storyworlds of different superheroes within a larger intra-company fictional universe. Frank Kelleter and I have described this change as a transition from a linear form of seriality represented, in its ideal type, by professionally produced series with simple episodic structures that seek to close themselves off from acts of creative appropriation by their recipients, to a form of multilinear seriality, which we understand as parallel and overlapping, often transmedially organized serial universes that possess a narrative memory and are produced by professional and increasingly by non-professional actors.³¹ By 1966, Batman did not just appear in *Detective Comics* and *Batman*, where he was subjected to a stylistic overhaul labeled “the new look” by DC, but also in comic book series like *The Brave and the Bold* and *Justice League of America*, fanzines like *Batmania* (discussed below), as well as the popular ABC live-action television series starring Adam West. In the *Batman* comics themselves, this change was mediated by repeated attempts to engage readers in narrative meaning making, for instance by asking them to decode narrative clues, encouraging them to guess the authors of the stories, and, in some cases, even directly calling on them to intervene in the trajectory of a serial plot. As a note beneath the final panel of “The Million Dollar Debut of Batgirl” (*Detective Comics* #359, Jan. 1967) reads: “Will the new Batgirl appear again? That depends on you, readers! Write and let us know!”³²

In the *Batman* comics of the 1960s, then, textual and paratextual mediations of authorship functions take place at the exact moment in which Bob Kane is no longer responsible for the series and is supplanted by new artists and writers under the artistic direction of Carmine Infantino, who had asked editor Julius Schwarz to print his name instead

31 Cf. Kelleter and Stein: “Lineare Serialität zeichnet sich idealtypisch durch professionell hergestellte mit einfachen Episoden- oder Fortsetzungsstrukturen aus, die sich gegen kreative Aneignung durch ihre Adressaten weitgehend abzuschließen versuchen. Multilineare Serialität bezeichnet im Idealtyp parallele und überlappende, oft medienübergreifend organisiert und mit narrativem Gedächtnis ausgestattete serielle Universen, die durch professionelle und zunehmend auch nicht-professionelle Akteure produziert werden” (2012: 264). Examples are stories that draw upon the readers’ knowledge of the series’ history and their engagement with ongoing parallel series (including team-ups and crossovers), intersecting character constellations and plotlines. “Gotham Line-Up!” (*Detective Comics* #328, June 1964), for example, features butler Alfred because “Batman and Robin are on a case out of town with Superman”; in “Whatever Will Happen to Heiress Heloise?” (*Detective Comics* #384, Feb. 1969), Batman fights alone because “Robin [is] off on a Teen Titans case.”

32 It seems that crime fiction, with its in-built emphasis on decoding mysteries, collecting hidden information, and interpreting clues is particularly prone to popular serialization. Examples from Anglo-American popular culture include the genre of the city mysteries in the antebellum period, the fan phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes from the late nineteenth century until today, the hard-boiled pulp magazine fiction of the 1920s and beyond, comics from *Dick Tracy* to *Sin City*, and a host of serial television shows.

of the Kane signature as early as 1964, thus indicating that fictions of authorial unity should no longer be hidden behind the Bob Kane label.³³ Therefore, actual changes in the authorship as well as a new consciousness among comic book authors and long-time readers, both of whom had begun to claim their own authority over the past, present, and future of the series, necessitated new mediations of comic book authorship. The letters pages constituted one form of collaborative mediation of the change at DC Comics from the era of singular author fictions and its attendant anonymous system of comics production to an era of explicit authorial attribution (first on covers, then on the stories, starting with *Batman* #204, Aug. 1968). They took part in a broader history of transactions between comic book producers and comic book consumers that affected the change from linear to multilinear storytelling and prepared the ground for the long story arcs and complex continuity demands of superhero comics in the coming decades.

A second noteworthy type of mediation welded the paratextual discourse of the letters pages to the actual Batman stories. Several stories from the 1960s thematize questions of authorship within their diegetic worlds. In one such story, Batman must solve a case regarding a mystery novel written by an anonymous author. In “The Perfect Crime—Slightly Imperfect” (*Batman* #181, June 1966), Commissioner Gordon claims, “No publisher would dare bring out a book under [mystery author Kaye Day’s] name if you hadn’t written it.” In another story, “The Million Dollar Debut of Batgirl,” Barbara Gordon (aka Batgirl) looks at books in a library that carry the names Infantino and Greene (both authors of this particular story) on their spines. It is plausible to read these stories as instances in which previously anonymous comic book authors announce their newfound prominence within the pages of the stories they are creating. But such authorial self-inscription also took on more explicit forms when readers encountered instances of explicit intradiegetic self-authorization. The first example appeared in “The Secret War of the Phantom General” (*Detective Comics* #343, Sept. 1965). Here, the narrative is interrupted by a panel that shows “the writer of this story” (John Broome, who remains unnamed) at work at his typewriter, warning readers “that you’re in for a startling surprise” (see figure 3). The writer appears a second time on the next page, encouraging an analytical approach to comics reading that sanctions the types of amateur criticism published in the fanzines of the times when he expresses happiness about having gotten “that flashback out of the way.” Both panels emphasize not just the fact that this story

33 Cf. Brooker 2001: 252. On comic book fictions of authorial unity, see Kelleter and Stein 2012; the author as label is conceptualized in Niefanger 2002.

was written by a particular author, whose fictive representation readers could see looking back at them from the comic book page and whose explicit presence was no longer confined to the paratextual realm, but also that comics authors labored under constant pressure: we see an editorial note stating “deadline 3/9/65” in the background of the first panel, and an image of what seems to be a deadline-enforcing editor on the wall punctuated by darts in the second.

A later story, “The Strange Death of Batman” (*Detective Comics* #347, Jan. 1966), is even more elaborate. It introduces the writer Gardner Fox at his workplace as he has just finished one story and is lying down to think up a speculative “what-if” scenario (see figure 4). In this instance, the visualization and intradiegetic depiction of comics authorship responds to the comic book paratext since readers would have known Gardner’s name from the letters page, but it also foregrounds the core mechanics of serial storytelling: the what-if mode of narrative invention and serial variation that would be popularized by Marvel’s series of the same title from the 1970s onwards and that had been present in DC Comics’ own Imaginary Stories since the 1940s.

Fanzines and Comic Book Authorization

Such explicit representations of authorship followed from, and they also further encouraged, the growth of comic book fandom and the emergence of a fan discourse outside of the company-controlled confines of comic book pages and letter columns. In fact, we are dealing with a paratextual discourse spreading into two directions simultaneously: into the stories themselves as well as beyond the superhero’s textual confines into the realm of the epitextual world of fanzines. These developments were generally supported by the major publishers because they secured the future of a serial genre hard-pressed to keep its readership involved and fulfill a consistent, if not always increasing, demand for new stories. DC thus promoted fan clubs and fanzines like *Batmania* in letter columns by printing plugs like the following: “HOT TIPS FROM BATMAN’S HOT-LINE: One of the Nation’s largest *Batman* fan clubs, the BATMANIANS, has announced that it is issuing a new club fanzine called BATMANIA. A free copy and full club particulars are available for 10c postage from B.J. White, 407 Sondra Avenue, Columbia, Missouri. We highly recommend it” (*Batman* #169, Feb. 1965).³⁴ Yet as a later letter by Tom Fagan in

³⁴ I was able to study all issues of *Batmania* at the Terry and Edwin Murray Special Collection at Duke University in North Carolina in July 2011 and want to thank research services librarian Elizabeth Dunn for coordinating my activities at Duke.



Figure 3: John Broome and Carmine Infantino, "The Secret War of the Phantom General," *Detective Comics* #343 (Sept. 1965). © DC Comics. All rights reserved.



Figure 4: Gardner Fox and Carmine Infantino, "The Strange Death of Batman," Detective Comics #347 (Jan. 1966). © DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Batman #180 (May 1966) indicates, the activities of the Batmanians also created new authorization conflicts that were the logical outcome of the editor's initial recognition of a fellowship of Batman fans and the increase in readerly claims to authoritative knowledge of the series:

We *Batmanians* have grouped together to promote *Batman*. Our membership is presently close to a thousand persons [...]. Our slogan—*For Batman we accept nothing as impossible!* I would like to invite anyone wishing to join the *Batmanians* to write directly to Biljo White [...]. The *Batmanians* are going places and we want all *Batman* fans alongside us.

DC featured this self-advertisement without any apparent hesitations, even though it issued a strong claim to a kind of authority that was no longer located exclusively in the hands of the publisher. Appealing to strength in numbers and formulating rather ambitious goals, Fagan underscored the power of new players in the field of superhero comics and their will to challenge those who officially produced *Batman*. And indeed, the permeability of the letters page as a paratextual border zone was illustrated quite forcefully by Bob Butts's related threat in *Batman* #186 (Nov. 1966): "If you refuse to elaborate on *Poison Ivy's* 'perfect crime' I swear by the mighty *batmobile*, I'll come to your offices with half of fandom to picket and protest!" Fagan, Butts, and fellow letter writers represent the kinds of 'active audiences' that Jennifer Hayward traces to the continuity newspaper comic strips of the 1930s and 1940s and the 'serial pleasures' that, according to Jared Gardner, follow from the ongoing interaction between comic strip producers and readers and that ultimately lead to the comic book 'fan addicts' of the 1950s and 1960s.³⁵

Yet the question remains how the *Batmania* fanzine (and, by implication, other fanzines) extended the superhero discourse, broadened the spectrum of authorization conflicts, allowed for the creation of new author roles, and thereby propelled the genre evolution of superhero comics toward longer storylines, sprawling character constellations, increasingly complex narrative universes, and interacting trajectories among different series. *Batmania* presented itself as a response to the revamped Batman of the early 1960s, which had updated the character and its look for a new generation of readers. As Biljo White explained in the first issue (July 1964): "I decided now that Editor Julius Schwartz is presenting a 'new look' Batman, it would be a good time to start a genuine BATMAN movement. In order to promote my ideas on advancing this movement, I have prepared this first issue of BATMANIA—the fanzine

³⁵ Hayward (1997: ch. 2) discusses the author-reader interaction surrounding Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*; Gardner (2012: ch. 2 and 3) looks at a variety of strips from Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff* to Sidney Smith's *The Gumps* and EC Comics fandom. On EC Comics 'fan-addicts,' see also Adler-Kassner 1997–1998; Pustz 1999: 36–43.

especially for BATMAN fans.” The fanzine’s stated objective was “to join together those who enjoy reading and collecting the stories of Batman.” The wording of these statements, especially their emphasis on comics fandom as a joint movement of emotionally invested readers and collectors, implies a democratic legitimization for a just cause. The fanzine thus offered a serial public forum for those whose only outlet had been the comic book letter columns. In that sense, it enacted the transformation from the letter column as an officially controlled peritext to a far less controlled, and potentially competing, space—the fanzine as epitext—at the very moment in which DC was trying to establish Batman’s new look.

But while *Batmania* presented itself as critical, it was not antagonistic or even subversive. In an editorial titled “The Batmania Philosophy,” White explained how he had solicited editor Julius Schwartz’s “blessing” and referred to his own authorial role as that of a “faned” (= fan editor) in analogy to the professional editorship at DC (*Batmania* #12, Oct. 1966). What is more, the first issue of *Batmania* was explicit about its legal status. It used copyrighted material on the cover but acknowledged National Publications (DC Comics) as the owner, announcing above another image: “Permission to publish and use the name ‘BATMANIA’ has been granted by National.” This symbiotic relationship between the respective producers of comic books and fanzines was rewarded by repeated references to “Batmanians” within the Batman comics and even to Biljo himself when a character was named after the fanzine editor in one story.³⁶ Thus authorized, the fanzine repeatedly appealed to those working at DC. White’s “Open Letter to Editor Jack Schiff” in issue #3 (Jan. 1965) spoke from the position of a well-informed and well-connected fanzine writer who could appeal to public sentiment to make his case: “I’ve been informed by many fans that they have written you for more stories of this type”; “I would like to make known a few opinions of loyal Batmanians and myself.” In an “Open Letter to Julius Schwartz,” Tom Fagan addressed issues of authority again: “Maybe to an editor the fans are annoying because of their constant demand for attention to detail and their frequent, sharp criticisms of poor story line and art work. But let’s face it. The fans are an outspoken vocal group of a far wider representation of readers than editors care to admit” (*Batmania Annual* 1967).

36 See “Hunted or—Haunted” (*Detective Comics* #376, June 1968); “The Man Who Radiated Fear” (*Batman* #200, Mar. 1968).

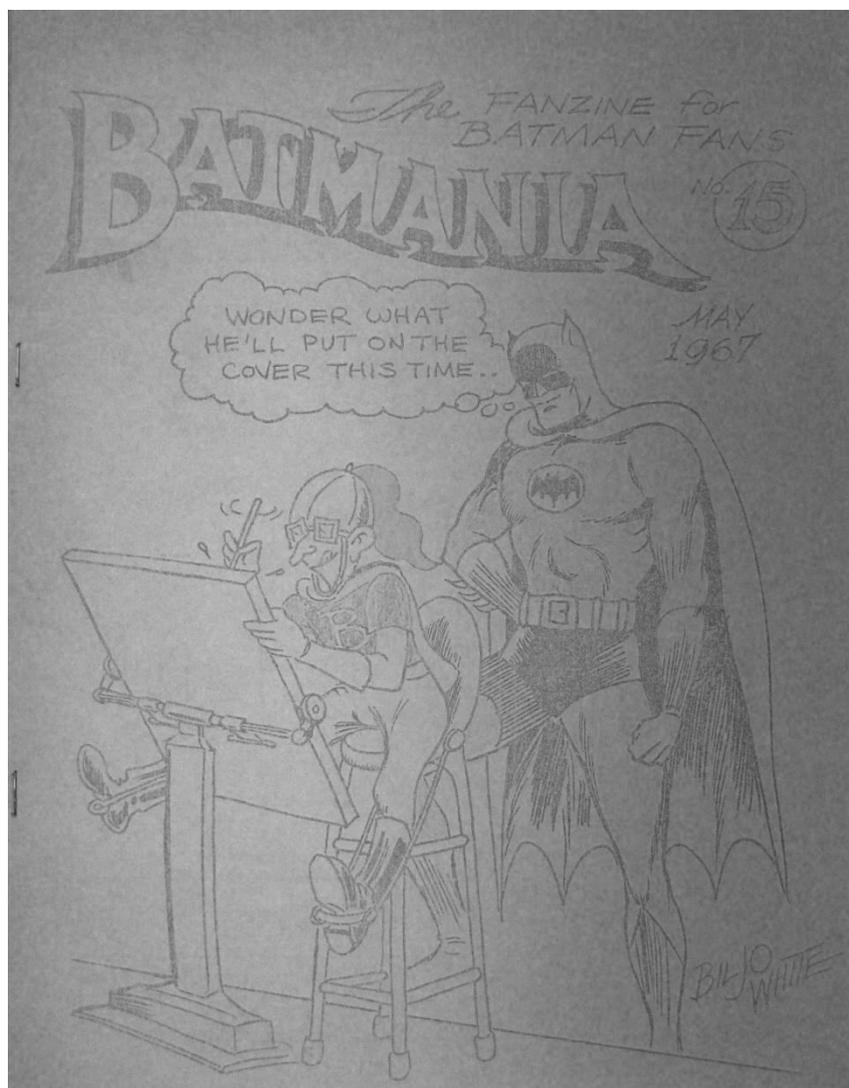


Figure 5: Biljo White, cover illustration, *Batmania* #15 (May 1967). All rights reserved.

In addition to challenging the decisions of DC editors directly and demanding a say in the development of Batman stories, fanzines also extended—and thus further diversified, and indeed serialized—the fictions and functions of comic book authorship. The cover of *Batmania* #15 (May 1967) is a good case in point (see figure 5). It depicts Biljo White at the drawing board, sketching away as an interested Batman is

looking over his shoulder, thinking: “Wonder what he’ll put on the cover this time.” Superheroes like Batman cannot ignore what is going on in fanzines like *Batmania*, this self-reflexive cover suggest, and White is not just the cover artist of this issue but also a competent copier of DC’s official Batman, as the visual rendition of the superhero indicates.

Batmania featured editorials, critical essays, historiographic research, fan fiction, and various visual renditions of Batman, all of which established the roles of fanzine editor, writer, and artist as legitimate contributors to the expanding universe of Batman stories and its surrounding discourses. Examples include artwork by Bill Ryan in issue #1 that humorously explored how Batman might have looked had he been drawn by various famous cartoonists, or critical essays such as Stephen Harrell’s “What Has the ‘New Look’ Done for Batman?” (*Batmania Annual* 1967). Significantly, some of these presentations were collaborative and participatory, substantiating the assumption that popular serial stories, and comics in particular, favor shared authorial responsibilities and tend to disperse creative authority to different factions of authors and readers: the very first story in *Batmania* #1, “The New Look,” was authored “by BILJO WHITE and BATMAN FANS from COAST-TO-COAST”; *Batmania* #15 even proposed a line of special issues created entirely by readers where “You will be the editor!”

However, fanzines rarely completely toppled the distinction between officially authorized comics authors and amateur artists or fan writers. Instead, we see the elevation of comic books from a low, throwaway type of youth entertainment to a revered form of cultural expression that offered many different actors a stake in their symbolic power. This process was accompanied by increasing efforts to make sense of how DC’s Batman comics were actually created and by whom. As George Pacinda writes in his article “Those Behind Batman” (*Batmania* #6, Oct. 1965):

With the advent of the “New Look” Batman there came praise for all concerned. There was praise for the editor, that fine genius who was mainly responsible for the change. There came credits to the writer, a master of scripting. The honor call continued with the pencil-artist, a true craftsman of delineation. Next came praise for the inker, an able and talented artist. Since these people are so well known, especially here in the pages of BATMANIA, I have purposely avoided listing them. [...] But [...] there are others.

These ‘others’ include those who letter the comics, proofread them, and do the actual printing. “Suppose we trace a comic, a BATMAN comic, to see how it comes into being,” Pacinda suggests and then provides a step-

by-step description of the production process.³⁷ Pacinda's article was published in October 1965, and it is remarkable that the serialized authorship discourse, which had begun with the introduction of the letter columns only a few years earlier, had clearly moved beyond the "guessing-the-author" game.³⁸ The article also produced a new author role: that of the enlightened critic as a mediating agent who stands in personal contact with those who are making comics, knows how they work, and presents his findings to "[t]he better educated fans."

The productive powers of the comic books paratext became especially apparent when such 'educated fans' were no longer satisfied with communicating in writing and sought out the producers of superhero comics in person during comic conventions that, in turn, reentered the paratextual space as they were covered by fanzines. The comics conventions were an extratextual manifestation of reader expectations and projections of comics authorship as well as evidence of the comics industry's realization that courting fans and sampling their opinions would benefit their business objectives. *Batmania* #7 (Nov. 1965) reported on the New York convention of 1965 ("Con-Cave Coming") and reconstructed the debate about the original authorship of Batman: "[Bill] Finger's comments filled in the history of Batman's success as a continually popular comic book character. Finger related how he had scripted the first Batman story, working in close conjunction with Bob Kane." The editor's note—"Tom Fagan has prepared an article on Bill tentatively entitled, 'Bill Finger, Man Behind A Legend', which is based upon a personal conversation with the writer during the ComicCon"—clearly points to the dispersal of author responsibilities: "Kane" actually stands for the contributions of many different writers and artists in the serial history of the character whose work was only now being recognized and whose efforts had been written out of Batman's history through earlier authorial fictions such as Kane's biography in *Batman* #1 and *Real Fact Comics* #5.

As Fagan's report of a later convention in *Batmania* #14 (Feb. 1967) illustrates, questions of authorship were at the forefront of the comic book discourse: "Why aren't artist and writer credits given in the Batman comic book sagas, asked a Batmanian. [Editor Julius] Schwartz explained

37 The most thorough historical analysis of American comic book production is Gabilliet 2010: part 2; for discussions among writers and artists, see Eisner 2001.

38 In *Batman* #206 (Nov. 1968), Joe Rusnak writes: "Figuring out the authors of stories isn't much fun now. The fad should soon be dying out because it's getting too easy," to which the DC editor responds: "[T]he author-guessing fad has run its course. From now on we're giving author (and artists) credit along with each story." Uricchio and Pearson interpret this new editorial policy as reflecting an "increasing valorization of comic book authorship, further encouraging fans to take an auteurist perspective of the production process" (1991: 188).

he had been giving these recently in letter-page paragraphs. He also stated that Bob Kane's contract with National [DC Comics] might stipulate Kane's name appear on Batman stories since Kane was the originator." While Kane's legal authority seemed somewhat uncertain,³⁹ Finger's remarks about his own role in the history of the series attained special relevance because they undermined the established authorial origin story behind the *Batman* series: "Finger, when called upon, told how he came up with the name of Robin for Batman's youthful companion when the strip was only a few month's [sic] old. On the start of Batman from the beginning, it was Finger's suggestions that added cowl, cape and gauntlets to the Batman costume."

Not surprisingly, Finger's remarks and their dissemination throughout the world of fanzines demanded a response from various sources, all of which laid claim to an authorial voice that possessed a substantial degree of authority. One of these responses was fan writer and editor Jerry Bails's "If the Truth Be Known or 'A Finger in Every Plot,'" which appeared in *Capa-alpha* #12 (Sept. 1965). Like Fagan's piece in *Batmania*, this exposé raised not just the question of who had actually authored the initial Batman character but also asked who was able to make his case in which form and forum. If DC Comics had presented the myth of solitary creation (albeit under editorial tutelage) in the 1940s, fanzine writers like Fagan and Bails now begin to act as investigative journalists and hobby historians who present their findings in settings they themselves control. Bails left little doubt about the close collaboration that he believed had led to the creation of Batman: "Bill is the man who first put words in the mouth of the Guardian of Gotham. He worked from the very beginning with Bob Kane in shaping and reshaping Comicdom's first truly mortal costumed character." But rather than reduce the complexity of author involvements, such authorization conflicts produced even more authors and more author roles. They diversified authorial practices and increased the pool of actors who could legitimately claim authorship status as much as they instigated new ways of managing the proliferation of author functions, enriching older fictions of comic book authorship with new origin stories.

Bails's exposé is a case in point. It spawned Bob Kane's "Open Letter to All 'Batmanians' Everywhere," which Kane sent out to be printed in *Batmania*.⁴⁰ Kane writes: "Now, Biljo, I'd like to emphatically set the

39 The narrative implications of legal restrictions and considerations for superhero comics are discussed in Gaines 1991: ch. 7; Packard 2010. Even today, Batman comics, television cartoons, movies, and computer games carry the byline "Batman created by Bob Kane."

40 The letter was dated Sept. 14, 1965, and eventually appeared in the *Batmania Annual* of 1967.

record straight, once and for all, about the many ‘myths’ and ‘conjectures’ that I read about myself and my creation, ‘Batman,’ in your ‘Fanzine’ and other publications [...]. I, Bob Kane, am the sole creator of ‘Batman.’” And then: “The truth is that Bill Finger is taking credit for much more than he deserves, and I refute much of his statements [...]. The fact is that I conceived the ‘Batman’ figure and costume entirely by myself, even before I called Bill in to help me write the ‘Batman.’ I created the title, masthead, the format and concept, as well as the Batman figure and costume.” Kane speaks as a professional author here, as the institutionally backed inventor of Batman. He does acknowledge that Finger co-wrote the early stories, but he locates the act of original creation before their first encounter, which makes Finger a hired gun rather than a genuine creator figure. But Kane has to make his claim plausible for a readership that has become increasingly aware of various forms of authorial collaboration and is critical of traditional author fictions. What we see here, then, is a shift in interpretive authority and the emergence of new actors with new competences. Batman fans are no longer passive readers, and neither are they mere letter writers; they are authors of critical essays and use their newfound authority to complicate Kane’s authorial status. Now, a writer like Bails can retroactively inscribe Finger’s authorship into the historiography of the series and thereby establish himself as an authority on comics history.

Once constituted, such authority is difficult to contain. Kane tried to control his author image but was forced to do so by appointing another fanzine writer as its protector (and thus authorizing yet another author and creating yet another author function). Sarcastically referring to Bails as “the self-appointed authority on Batman,” Kane then makes White the “unofficial guardian of pertinent Batmania folklore.” Kane obviously missed the double irony inherent in this statement. It remains unclear, for one, how an “unofficial guardian” might effectively overrule the verdict of a “self-appointed authority.” If authority may either be bestowed upon someone by a higher order or power (and would then be more or less official, which White’s authority is explicitly not) or earned on its own strength (which means that authorities can be self-appointed if they can legitimize themselves within a discourse community), neither White’s nor Bails’s claim to the correct view of Batman’s authorship is *per se* more authoritative than the other. The reason for this unresolved tension is already (and apparently unintentionally) implied in Kane’s statement: if Batman’s existence in popular culture is equated with the workings of folklore (a much-cited and certainly debatable equation), then any attempt to pin down his original or most authoritative authorship is rendered moot from the start. At least in the original sense of the word, folklore is a

prominent example of serial storytelling, but its imperatives run counter to the very romantically charged notions of individual authorship and the modern legal understanding of copyrighted and trademarked production that undergird Kane's claim to being the sole creator of Batman.

Conclusion

My reflections on the serial fictions and functions of authorship in American superhero comics in this chapter have obviously been reductive. To single out one character, one genre, and one time period cannot do justice to the wealth and complexity of the many issues involved. Moreover, I have, largely out of necessity, ignored questions of authorship construction through individual drawing styles, narrative voices, intraserial retcons, metanarratives, and various other kinds of mechanisms through which superhero comics have moved beyond Eco's dialectic of author-controlled repetition and variation and toward a more diversified process that William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson have labeled "containment and refraction" (1991: 211).⁴¹ What I do want to suggest in conclusion, however, is that the notion of the threshold may offer a compelling metaphor for further investigation, especially if we want to pursue the assumption that the sequential structuring of comics narratives and the serial organization of ongoing stories serve as openings, or gaps, for projections, mediations, transactions, and other kinds of productive and creative maneuvers through which those who produce and read comics struggle to achieve closure where serial comics must, by their very nature, remain unclosed, always ready for a new installment or variation as long someone is buying. After all, in order to decipher the full-scale workings of serial storytelling in comics at specific historical moments, we would have to consider a range of thresholds performing very actively as mediators: the gutter as the threshold between panels; the multimodal or intermedial threshold between image and text; as well as various other types of thresholds among texts, peritexts, and epitexts; between individual installments and accumulating series; between superhero comics and other genres; between comics genres and other media; and between different nationally conceived comics traditions in our rapidly globalizing world.

41 For further investigation, see Stein 2013a, 2013b.

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