



Crumb and Crummier

by James Bowman

Val Kilmer has taken the place of Michael Keaton as the Caped Crusader, and we have for the first time in the cinematic redaction of the Batman story a version of Robin the Wonder Boy (Chris O'Donnell). There are two new villains, Tommy Lee Jones as Two-Face and Jim Carrey as the Riddler, but otherwise the saga of Batman goes on without missing a beat. Indeed, the title of the latest in the series, *Batman Forever*, directed by Joel Schumacher, begins to sound like a threat. Yet if you look closer, there have been a few changes since *Batman* swept the country in 1989.

The most interesting of these have to do with the depiction of Gotham. Gone is the gloomy, desolate urban landscape. No longer is there the pervasive sense of criminal danger lurking in the shadows. Gotham has undergone the mother of all urban renewals. Now it is gleaming, hi-tech, functional, clean, and sunlit. Everything works. Even the one scene depicting a descent into the supposedly dark underside of the city, where there are villainous looking street toughs and lurid graffiti and fires in barrels in the streets, has the look of designer decay. The glow of neon is all around, and the bad guys dress in Halloween costumes and masks and parodies of evening dress.

Of course the internal logic of the Batman concept has always been at odds with the idea of crime as something engaged in by squalid, solitary sociopaths. Although Batman is supposed to have come to his calling through seeing his parents gunned down by a mere mugger, the criminals

who engage his adult attention are always highly sophisticated, highly organized CEOs of high-tech conglomerates who, like Batman himself, give as much thought to their public images as they do to their criminal lusts. In *Batman Forever*, more than in the earlier films, the organizing principle is symmetry, and what has always been essentially true is now made literally true, namely that a sort of Bad Guys Inc. has been created as a business competitor of Bruce Wayne Industries.

The fact that top executives of both have a taste for fancy dress can be put down to advertising. For the film is all about costuming and packaging and public image. Batman and his enemies both make theatrical entrances and equally theatrical gestures. Two-Face's attack on a circus is advertised by his taking over for the ringmaster and announcing his criminal enterprise as the next act. Likewise, the Riddler, in the climactic scene, plays a game-show host. Even their wicked henchmen are all dressed in leather jumpsuits and weirdly zippered hoods. The Riddler is shown agonizing over what to call himself and the costume he will adopt. When Batman appears after Two-Face has crashed yet another high society party, the Riddler says to his partner: "Your entrance was good. His was better."

Dr. Chase Meridian (Nicole Kidman), love interest of Batman/Bruce Wayne, comments on Batman's entrance in the opening section of the film. She also serves as on-site psychologist to elucidate the hidden motives of both heroes and villains and their weird penchant for secret identities. Though androgynously named and in other respects a new Hollywood woman with a profession and a taste for working out with the

heavy bag, Dr. Chase always appears in slinky, feminine dresses, and she ultimately needs Batman to save her life. What she manages to make clear, even without using her credentials in psychology, is that underneath *Batman Forever's* glossy camp is a classic male fantasy.

Thus the film itself may be said to be wearing a disguise. The irony implied by its exaggeration of the super-hero trappings is itself ironic—a double bluff. It really is about bashing bad guys, rescuing fair maidens, and playing with hi-tech toys, all of which are ingredients in traditional male fantasy. And it is the fantasy, not the tongue in the cheek, that makes it a commercial proposition.

In order to find its audience, female fantasy of the sort that we find in *The Bridges of Madison County* does not need to disguise itself so carefully. The most interesting thing about this film is the way in which Richard LaGravenese's script and Clint Eastwood's direction have done wonders with Robert James Waller's novel, cutting down its vast jungles of poison-flowery prose and leaving the outlines of the fantasy standing stark and simple against the flat Iowa landscape. It is still a banality (this housewife is said to have "dreams" that her husband, decent guy though he is, has been unable to fulfill, but we are never told what they are) pumped up with atmospherics, just like the novel—but the atmosphere is a little more breathable than in the novel.

This is also because Eastwood partly turns away from the affair between Robert Kincaid (played by Eastwood himself) and Francesca Johnson (Meryl Streep) and pays more attention to the framing device of its discovery after her

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death by her son Michael (Victor Slezak) and daughter Caroline (Annie Corley). They are touched because their mother denied herself her great love for their sake. But what really strikes home to Caroline, who is also troubled by a bad marriage about which no details are supplied (perhaps she, too, has unfulfilled dreams), is that her mother had been looking forward to the time when the then-16-year-old Caroline would "fall in love" and want to "build a life with someone." What would she think if her mom had run off with a photographer from *National Geographic*? "What would this say to her?"

In the event, what the affair *does* say to her, once she has read mom's diary after her death, is apparently: "Get a divorce!" Or, in the words of Meryl Streep's voice-over: "Do what you have to to be happy in this life. There is so much beauty." Caryn James in the *New York Times* thinks that the secret of the book's success is that it "is really about the nobility of living an ordinary life. It is about renouncing grand passion in favor of being a wife and mother, as Francesca does." But the movie, while it wishes to retain the book's pathos, really has no time for nobility and renunciation. There the message conveyed by mom is that she was a schmuck to stay with hubby at the expense of those unspecified dreams. The only images we are given of "the nobility of living an ordinary life" consist of drudgery housework and one shot of the family sitting in the living room watching "F Troop." If this is "the noble choice," I don't think Clint Eastwood thinks so.

Thus, if the book's fantasy is improved on by the film in one way, it is debased and rendered as crass and cartoonish as *Batman Forever* in another way. Such cartoons and their live-action equivalents are increasingly all that Hollywood has at its disposal to treat serious subjects, which is why serious subjects are so frequently rendered trivial.

But the Movie of the Month, *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff, reverses the process. A documentary about the cult cartoonist, R. Crumb, the man behind "Keep on Truckin'" and *Fritz the Cat*, among other classics (apparently) of the era, it turns

out to be a serious, if disturbing, piece of work and perhaps the best film ever made about the 1960s.

Before I went to see it I just thought of the sixties' counterculture as real dumb. Now I still think of it as real dumb, but I understand the impulses that made it what it was much better than I did. *Crumb* presents it all as an exercise in dork liberation. Blacks, women, gays were all a-stirring under their constraints in the sixties, but it was dorky white males like Robert Crumb and his two brothers—guys who were sex-obsessed yet more or less deficient in such traditional means of attracting girls as looks, brains, personality, money, or athletic talents—who were really in the driver's seat of the Revolution. Crumb is himself an engaging character who is still drawing pictures of the girls he had crushes on in high school while dwelling on his complete lack of success with them at the time.

Even worse was his older brother Charles, who was at the time of the film a middle-aged man still living with his mother and taking lots and lots of anti-depressants. His personal hygiene is not too good and he says he has now lost interest in sex. Robert says he never had it. What unites the two brothers, together with a third, Maxon, who is in a home in California, is a common hatred for their father, whom Charles calls "an overbearing tyrant." He is now dead, but he seems to have been a caricature of the 1950s paterfamilias whose expectations of his sons in particular (there were also two daughters who declined to be interviewed for the film) were very high and untempered by any love or understanding for their sensitive and artistic sides.

We see a picture of the hated father, a corporate, gray-flannel-suited type with a frozen smile for whom Crumb, if not his brothers, now feels rather sorry: he was such a macho type and all his kids turned out to be "weird and wimpy." For both boys, as Charles says, "High school was a nightmare," but Charles seems to have been thrown into a kind of unrelenting despair by it (he committed suicide shortly after the film was made) while Robert made some use of the experience. "I was really a jerk," he says, but after a while he realized that this made him interestingly different from all those who were trying so hard to conform. "I was

not in the same world they were in"—and this produced "a sense of freedom."

The result of this freedom was a seemingly never-ending succession of disturbed and disturbing sexual images in his cartoons; castration fantasies and anti-female drawings of voluptuous women with the heads of birds of prey (or with no heads at all) or women who are huge in size and dwarf the bug-like little men who crawl over them. For all of this, as for his chaotic personal life, Crumb cheerfully declines to take any responsibility. He is engagingly helpless, like Mr. Skimpole in *Bleak House*, in the grip of his baser urges. "Maybe I should be locked up and my pencils taken away from me," he acknowledges. "But I've got to do it [cartooning in his obscene and scurrilous way]. I can't help myself."

What is hilarious about the film is the way that it shows the world taking Crumb far more seriously than he takes himself. Robert Hughes is wheeled out, for example, to opine that "Crumb is the Breughel of the second half of the twentieth century." He claims to see "elements of Goya" in Crumb's work, while a gallery owner describes Crumb as "the Daumier of our time." When it is said that he continues to masturbate to his own comics, Hughes comments, not entirely facetiously: "I'm sure Picasso did." But it is Crumb's long-suffering wife who sums up his art as "id in pure form: the dark side of everybody." How sixties! Crumb himself frankly admits to his "hostility to women," but he also seems to think that this is not so bad because "I get it out" in cartoons.

"Getting it out" is what the various liberations of the 1960s were all about, and the most lasting consequence of that procedure has been the place of honor accorded to mere fantasy in our art and culture. White male fantasies like *Batman Forever* have lately taken to camouflaging themselves with irony, while female fantasies, like *The Bridges of Madison County*, are allowed to be more blatant. But all are like R. Crumb's drawings in being an essentially therapeutic response to the sense of frustration and powerlessness characteristic of our social atomization. It should not surprise us that so much therapy is the mark of a sick culture. □

Says the press release that arrived with this volume, "Anyone who spends even a few minutes with the book will be a better writer." And, indeed, I feel a spate of better writing coming on. The pharisaical, malefic, and incogitant *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* is a product of the pointy-headed wowers at the Association of American University Presses, who in 1987 established a "Task Force on Bias-Free Language" filled with cranks, pokenoses, blow-hards, four-flushers, and pettifogs. The foolish and contemptible product of this seven years wasted in mining the shafts of indignation has been published by that cow-besieged, basketball-sotted sleep-away camp for hick bourgeois offspring, Indiana University, under the aegis of its University Press—a traditional dumping ground for academic deadwood so bereft of talent, intelligence, and endeavor as to be useless even in the dull precincts of Midwestern state college classrooms.

But perhaps I'm biased. What, after all, is wrong with a project of this ilk? Academic language is, I guess, supposed to be exact and neutral, a sort of mathematics of ideas, with information recorded in a complete and explicit manner, the record formulated into theories, and attempts made to prove those formulae valid or not. The preface to *Guidelines* says, "Our aim is simply to encourage sensitivity to usages that may be imprecise, misleading, and needlessly offensive." And few scholars would care to have their usages so viewed, myself excluded.

The principal author of the text, Ms. Schwartz . . . (I apologize. In the first chapter of *Guidelines*, titled "Gender," it says, in Section 1.41, lines 4-5: "Scholars normally refer to individuals

P.J. O'Rourke, a member of The American Spectator's editorial board, attended sheep-enhanced, football-endowed, four-year resort for the sophisticated urbane scions of Sandusky and Dayton—Miami of Ohio.

GUIDELINES FOR BIAS-FREE WRITING

Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force
on Bias-Free Language of the Association
of American University Presses

Indiana University Press / 100 pages / \$15; \$5.95 paper

reviewed by P. J. O'ROURKE

solely by their full or their last names, omitting courtesy titles.")

The principal author of the text, Schwartz . . . (No, I'm afraid that won't do. Vid. Section 1.41, lines 23-25: "Because African-American women have had to struggle for the use of traditional courtesy titles, some prefer *Mrs.* and *Miss*," and it would be biased to assume that Schwartz is a white name.)

Mrs. or Miss Marilyn Schwartz . . . (Gee, I'm sorry. Section 1.41, lines 1-2: "Most guidelines for nonsexist usage urge writers to avoid gratuitous references to the marital status of women.")

Anyway, as I was saying, Ms. Schwartz . . . (Excuse me. Lines 7-9: "*Ms.* may seem anachronistic or ironic if used for a woman who lived prior to the second U.S. feminist movement of the 1960s," and the head of the Task Force on Bias-Free Language may be, for all we know, old as the hills.)

So, Marilyn . . . (Oops. Section 1.42, lines 1-3: "Careful writers normally avoid referring to a woman by her first name alone because of the trivializing or condescending effect.")

And *that's* what's wrong with a project of this ilk.

Nonetheless, the principal author—What's-Her-Face—has crafted a smooth, good-tempered, even ingratiating tract. The more ridiculous neologisms and euphemistic expressions are shunned. Thieves are not "differently ethiced," women isn't spelled with any y's, and men aren't "ovum-deprived reproductivity aids—optional equipment only." A tone of mollifying suggestion is

used: "The following recommendations are not intended as prescriptive . . ." (Though in a project this bossy it is impossible for the imperative mood to completely disappear: "Writers must resort to gender-neutral alternatives where the common gender form has become strongly marked as masculine." Therefore, if the Fire Department's standards of strength and fitness are changed to allow sexual parity in hiring, I shall be care-

ful to say that the person who was too weak and small to carry me down the ladder was a *fire fighter*, not a *fireman*.)

And pains are taken to extend linguistic sensitivity beyond the realms of the fashionably oppressed to Christians ("Terms may be pejorative rather than descriptive in some contexts—*born again, cult, evangelical, fundamentalist, sect* . . ."), teenagers, and adolescents ("these terms may carry unwanted connotations because of their frequent occurrence in phrases referring to social and behavioral problems"), and even Republicans ("some married women . . . deplore *Ms.* because of its feminist connotations"). Levity is attempted. Once. This unattributed example of textbook prose is given to show just how funny a lack of feminism can be:

Man, like other mammals, breast feeds his young.

A *mea culpa* turn is performed at the end of the preface:

Finally, we realize—lest there be any misunderstanding about this—that there is no such thing as truly bias-free language and that our advice is inevitably shaped by our own point of view—that of white, North American (specifically U.S.), feminist publishing professionals.

And there is even an endearing little lapse on page 36:

A judicious use of ellipses or bracketed interpolations may enable the author to *skirt the problem* [italics, let this interpolation note, are my own].