This year the world’s most popular superhero, Batman, celebrates his 75th birthday. From inauspicious beginnings in a six-page comic to the transmedia anchor of one of the world’s largest media conglomerates, Time Warner, the hero has cast his shadow across many forms and entertainments. Such as …

**Comic books**

When Superman lifted a carload of criminals above his head on the cover of Action Comics #1 in 1938, the nascent American comic book industry found its defining genre. Young artist Bob Kane hoped to create the next soaring star – with the red unitard and domino mask-wearing Bird-Man.

Fortunately Kane collaborated with writer Bill Finger. The character’s colour scheme shifted to black and his domino mask morphed into a cowl with pointed ears. “Bat-Man” debuted in Detective Comics #27 in May 1939 and he has enjoyed monthly adventures ever since.

But consistent publication does not mean consistent quality. To compete with new comic book genres following the second world war, Batman comics became an increasingly surreal mix of sensational covers, sci-fi cliché and imaginary tales. There were lurid storylines, such as The Rainbow Batman (Detective Comics #241, March 1953), in which the once Dark Knight donned a series of multi-colour costumes.

Nonetheless, Batman enjoyed more creative peaks than other long-standing comic characters, with some of the best standalone stories reflecting on the character’s rich legacy.

In The Batman Nobody Knows! (Batman #250, July 1973) Bruce Wayne takes some “ghetto hardened kids” on a camping trip. While swapping campfire stories each child offers their own interpretation of the “real” Batman, ranging from a ten-foot monster to a “down to Earth hip-dude”. Despite its dated dialogue, The Batman Nobody Knows! is one of the first stories to recognise that this mythic hero defies any fixed identity, and is always open to reinterpretation.

**Graphic novels**

The term “graphic novel” emerged in the late 1970s to describe comics with complete stories, quality printing, and high-minded intentions. Although these books sought to distinguish themselves from serialised power fantasies, mainstream publishers soon gravitated to this bookstore friendly format.

While other heroes enjoyed a smattering of graphic novel success, Batman flourished, with early hits including writer/artist Frank Miller’s dystopic Dark Knight Returns, in which a middle-aged Batman slips back on the cowl. Miller also revisited the hero’s origin in Batman: Year One, establishing the template for future interpretations, including Batman Begins.

More recently, writer Jeph Loeb crafted the year-long mystery The Long Halloween, while Geoff Johns’ Batman: Earth One reinterprets the timeless hero for the 21st century.

Yet, the standout graphic novel for many remains 1988’s The Killing Joke. The tightly crafted Alan Moore and Brian Bolland comic sees Batman and Joker’s long-standing feud reach a tipping point when the criminal cripples Barbara Gordon (aka Batgirl). Bolland’s neon-drenched art brings a weight and realism rarely seen in Gotham. Moore, embracing the unique layouts of comics, constructs a perverse hall of mirrors that exposes the
hero and villain’s co-dependent relationship.

**Television**

This year will see the launch of *Gotham*, a new television series in which Bruce Wayne is a recently orphaned teen.

It remains to be seen if *Gotham* can match the success of similar young superhero series *Smallville* and *Arrow*, but should it survive the competitive primetime TV schedule it will still be measured against the two most successful Dark Knight series: the camp classic starring Adam West, and the noir-fuelled triumph of *Batman: The Animated Series*.

A taste of Batman in 1966.

With high production values, committed leads and A-list villains, *Batman*, the television series, was a sensation when it premiered in 1966.

Although the series brought the hero unprecedented popularity, comic fans were quick to dismiss it as Technicolor prevision of the Dark Knight. Strident fans often fail to recognise that without Adam West’s deadpan delivery, Burt Ward’s spirited puns, and the show’s mantra-like theme song, *Batman* would not be the potent pop culture force he is today.

For cultural impact it is hard to dispute the legacy of West’s Batman, but as perhaps the purest distillation of the Dark Knight in any form, *Batman: The Animated Series* remains a towering achievement. First airing in 1992, the series’ complex storylines, Art Deco style, and reverence for the source material set a new standard for television animation and Batman’s screen adventures.

Opening credits for *Batman: The Animated Series*.

**Cinema**

In creating *Batman*, Bob Kane and his collaborators borrowed heavily from cinema, with the hero’s style indebted to the 1930 mystery film *The Bat Whispers*, while *Gotham* is modelled on pre-code gangster films such as *The Public Enemy*.

Given the debt *Batman* owes to cinema, it is appropriate that the hero has been the basis of a number of big-screen adaptations. The first effort was a wartime serial that promised *Batman* would be “A hundred times more thrilling on the screen!” But, with its paltry budget, ill-fitting costumes, and stodgy sets, the serial unsurprisingly failed to live up to its source.

Trailer for *Batman* (1989).

In the 1960s, pop art aficionados began hosting ironic screenings of this early adaptation, inspiring the development of the *Batman* television series. While the show enjoyed a spin-off feature, *Batman* was curiously absent from cinema screens until 1989, when *Beetlejuice* director Tim Burton brought his gothic sensibility to *Batman* and its superior sequel *Batman Returns*.

These blockbusters ushered in a wave of Batmania, and a darker knight managed to banish memories of Adam West’s Technicolor pratfalls. But this work was undone with director Joel Schumacher’s follow-ups. In particular the pun-laden dialogue and day-glo aesthetic of *Batman & Robin* (1997) was seen by many as a return to the camp crusader, and fans, recently empowered by the web, vilified the film and its director.

It took director Christopher Nolan’s realist approach to wake Batman from a eight-year cinematic hibernation.

*Batman Begins* (2005) inaugurated a blockbusting trilogy that closed with the satisfying *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. But the crowning achievement of this series and *Batman*’s cinematic career is undoubtedly *The Dark Knight*. 

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Trailer for The Dark Knight (2008).

Brimming with post-9/11 anxiety the film reintroduces the Joker as a scarred anarchist played to baroque perfection by Heath Ledger in his last major role. More restrained, but no less impressive, is Christian Bale’s compromised Batman who frequently questions the morality of his actions. Filled with now iconic moments, the film raised the bar for the entire comic-book movie genre.

Merchandise

With their recognisable imagery and built-in fanbase, superheroes have long been used to distinguish consumer products, and Batman, with his logo/brand emblazoned across his chest, is no exception.

Not long after his first appearance, the caped crusader joined Superman at the New York World’s Fair where action figures were given away as carnival prizes. Today, the iconic bat-logo is liberally applied to an endless array of merchandise, yet the most successful tie-ins are often those that provide the experience of being Batman.

    Batman: now a Lego minifig. Spielbrick films

Most commentators agree that Batman’s appeal stems from his mortal status. He has no alien ancestry, magic rings, or radioactive gifts, he is an ordinary man committed to a single goal. Thus, the gap between fan and hero seems more surmountable. Accordingly, many tie-in products play on this wish fulfilment, whether it is navigating the Dark Knight through the immersive world of the best-selling Arkham videogames, or a Lego Batman scaling the heights of a miniature Gotham.

Nonetheless, the most potent piece of Bat-merchandise is the costume. As early as 1943 the Philadelphia Record gave away a flimsy Batman mask – and today fans can get detailed costumes that would not look out of place on a Hollywood soundstage.

Yet, as the recent example of five-year-old cancer survivor Miles Scott (aka Batkid) reminds us, irrespective of the quality of the costume, slipping on the mask can allow anyone to tap into the rich mythology of this 75-year-old icon.

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Pitch an idea to the Arts + Culture editor.