

The Boy Who Loved Batman: Michael Uslan's Journey from New Jersey to Hollywood

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Movie producer Michael E. Uslan's *Batman* franchise has produced the highest grossing movie in two separate years: *Batman* in 1989 and *The Dark Knight* in 2008. The next film in the series, *The Dark Knight Rises*, recently went into production for a planned summer 2012 release.

At New York Comic Con — a convention for fans of comic books and popular culture — Uslan addressed an audience of mostly young people to describe his journey from a “blue-collar kid” from New Jersey to a successful motion picture producer. The story of his path to Hollywood is also the subject of Uslan's forthcoming autobiography, *The Boy Who Loved Batman*.

Indeed, as a boy, Uslan loved comic books in general and *Batman* in particular. In July 1964, he attended the first-ever comic book convention. Unlike the spectacular trade show of today, this first comic con was held in what Uslan described as “a flea-bag hotel just off the Bowery” in New York. Uslan recalled that, “as we checked into the hotel, we had to literally step over an unconscious drunk in the hallway, and there were roaches on the walls. My mother was absolutely apoplectic. She said, ‘We're outta here.’” Fortunately, his father interceded and Uslan was able to attend.

A comic book auction was held during the convention, and Uslan wanted to buy *Batman* #1. He and his brother pooled their money for the purchase — \$22. As the bidding approached that limit, Uslan appealed to his father for additional funds. He supplied an additional \$5, which Uslan was sure would be enough to win the prize. The comic sold for \$29 to another bidder. (In recent years, copies of the same comic have sold in the rage of \$50,000 to \$100,000.)

Despite this setback, Uslan kept collecting comic books, and by the time he graduated from high school, he had acquired a collection of 30,000 comic books dating back to 1936. Uslan wasn't satisfied merely reading these tales of the Dark Knight, however. As he told the New York Comic Con audience, “All I wanted to do when I was eight was to one day write *Batman* comics.”

In Uslan's view, no other superhero could compare to Batman because he had no super powers. “Batman's greatest

super power was his humanity,” Uslan said, “That’s why I was able to identify with him as a kid instead of Superman or Spider-Man or Hulk. I knew in my heart of hearts, if I studied really hard, and if I worked out really hard, and if my dad bought me a cool car, I could be this guy.”

In January 1966, an event that Uslan described as “earth-shaking” occurred: ABC premiered the “Batman” television show featuring Adam West as a comedic version of the Caped Crusader. Uslan was “simultaneously thrilled and horrified.” He recalled, “I was thrilled because — here is Batman! And it was in color — and the car looked really cool. But I was horrified that the whole world was laughing at Batman.” That night, Uslan made a vow “the same way young Bruce Wayne did over the bodies of his [slain] parents: I swore that someday, somehow, I would erase from the collective consciousness of the world culture three little words: pow, zap, and wham. That became my mission in life.”

The first major step toward that goal came when Uslan went to college at Indiana University in Bloomington — his first time away from the New Jersey/New York region. It was the early 1970s, “a time of great experimentation on college campuses,” Uslan noted. An experimental curriculum program at IU allowed anyone to create and teach a fully accredited course if it was approved by an academic department. Uslan was determined to teach a college course on comic books.

To Uslan, it made complete sense. “Comic books are a legitimate American art form, as indigenous to this country as jazz,” he explained. “I contend... that the ancient gods of Greece, Rome and Egypt still exist, except today they wear spandex and capes.”

To prove his point, he turned to the audience at New York Comic Con and asked, “The Greeks called him Poseidon, the Romans called him Neptune — What do we call him?” “Aquaman!” the audience shouted back. “Mercury?” Uslan asked. “Flash!” the crowd answered. “These guys are still around, come on!” Uslan said.

Sporting long hair and wearing a Spider-Man T-shirt (“probably not the best choice,” Uslan observed), he went before the dean and other academics at IU to get approval for his comic book course. Shortly after Uslan started his pitch, the dean cut him off, saying, “Stop. I don’t buy any of this. I read every issue of *Superman* I could get my hands on as a kid, but all comic books are cheap entertainment for children — nothing more, nothing less. I reject your theory.”

Rather than accept defeat, Uslan decided to challenge the dean, and asked whether he could pose two questions. When the dean agreed, Uslan asked, “Are you familiar with the story of Moses?” The dean said he was, and Uslan continued, “Very briefly, could you summarize the story of Moses?” Uslan recounted the skeptical dean saying, “I don’t know what game you’re playing here, but I’ll play this with you. The Hebrew people were being persecuted and their first-born were being slain. A Hebrew couple placed their infant son in a little wicker basket and sent it down the river Nile, where he’s discovered by an Egyptian family who raise him as their own son. When he grows up and learns his true heritage, he becomes a hero to his people....”

Uslan interrupted the dean’s narrative, thanked him, and continued, “You said you read Superman comics. Do you remember the origin of Superman?” “Well, sure,” the dean responded, “Planet Krypton was about to blow up. A scientist and his wife placed their infant son in a little rocket ship and sent him to earth. There he’s discovered by the Kents, who raise him as their own son....” The dean stopped, stared at Uslan, and told him his course was approved.

Remembering his mother’s advice that “you can have the greatest creative wares in the world, but if you don’t market yourself, nobody will ever know about it,” Uslan then anonymously contacted United Press International in Indianapolis and complained — in the strongest terms possible — that he was outraged that there was a course being taught at Indiana University on comic books. The reporter, investigating the claim, subsequently interviewed the course’s instructor — Uslan. The story was picked up by papers across the country. Other reporters came to class and the story went viral. Uslan even received a call from Marvel Comics editor-in-chief Stan Lee, who told him, “What you’re doing is great for

~~The online journal for students interested in finding out more about the world of~~
the comic book industry. How can I help you?” Sol Harrison, vice-president of DC Comics, also offered his support and offered to fly Uslan to New York to discuss ways to work together. DC Comics offered him a summer internship.

On a Tightrope over Niagara Falls

One evening while working at DC Comics, Uslan encountered editor Denny O’Neil in a panic because he needed a script for *The Shadow* by the next day, and he didn’t have an idea for one. Uslan chimed in, “I do” — even though he didn’t. Making up the tale on the spot, Uslan wove together a few facts he knew about the 1930s — the period in which *The Shadow* takes place — to concoct a story of smugglers going over Niagara Falls in barrels and the Shadow fighting a villain on a tightrope over the falls. O’Neil took the bait and said, “Can you have this script on my desk by 6 o’clock tomorrow night?” Uslan answered, “No problem,” and, at that moment, became a writer for DC comics. After pulling an all-nighter, Uslan delivered the script.

A couple of weeks later, Julius “Julie” Schwartz, an editor at DC, and, according to Uslan, “the most important editor in comics,” spotted him in the hallway and said, “Hey, kid. I read your *Shadow* script. It didn’t stink. How’d you like to take a shot at writing *Batman*?” His lifelong dream had come true, and Uslan penned his first Batman story.

On the heels of that victory, a new dream was hatched. Recalling the campy “Batman” television series, Uslan was determined to make a dark, serious Batman movie that reflected the view of the character he had had since his boyhood. He went to Sol Harrison, then president of DC Comics, with his idea. Harrison told him that since the TV series, no one was interested in seeing *Batman* on screen. Harrison suggested he shelve the idea and get his credentials.

After college, Uslan decided his next move was to go to law school. Without the necessary funds, however, he “did the unthinkable” and sold 20,000 of his comics to pay for three years of law school tuition and purchase an engagement ring for his bride-to-be.

In law school, he studied communications and entertainment law. After graduating, he got a job at the only studio then based in New York, United Artists, where he oversaw the legal business affairs of a string of movies, including the first three *Rocky* pictures, *Raging Bull* and *Apocalypse Now*. UA was a great training ground, Uslan said, but he wasn’t interested in being a lawyer: He wanted to make movies based on comic books.

Uslan was convinced that if he owned the movie rights to Batman, every studio would be eager to make the film. “After all, how could they not see it? The sequels, the animation, the merchandising — everything that would come along with a Batman movie franchise.”

He persisted in lobbying DC to make a deal for the movie rights. Finally, on October 3, 1979, after a six-month negotiation, Uslan and his partner, Benjamin Melniker, formed Batfilm Productions and optioned the movie rights to Batman for an undisclosed sum. Uslan then went in to his boss’s office and quit. His boss implored him to stay one more year by offering him an increase in pay — and pointing out that Uslan’s wife was pregnant, he was building his first house, and getting a movie made can take several years. (It ultimately took 10.) After sleeping on it for a night and talking it over with his wife, Uslan went into his boss’s office and quit.

Despite his enthusiasm for the project, Uslan was turned down by every major studio in Hollywood. He was told he was nuts to try to make a movie based on an old television series. Or that he couldn’t do a dark, serious Batman because the hokey character from television was the only Batman that audiences would remember.

Some of the rejections Uslan received were bizarre. After he “pitched [his] heart out” at Columbia Pictures, the head of production shook his head and told Uslan that Batman would never be successful because Columbia Pictures’ movie version of *Annie* didn’t do well. “The little red-headed girl that sings ‘Tomorrow’?” a puzzled Uslan asked. “What has

The online journal for students interested in finding out more about the world of
that got to do with Batman?” “Come on, Michael, they’re both out of the funny pages,” was the reply.

At his former employer, United Artists, Uslan was told that a movie about Batman and Robin wouldn’t do well because the Robin Hood film *Robin & Marian* didn’t do well. A stunned Uslan left the room wondering how that film had any relation to his proposed Batman movie. “I could only conclude he rejected Batman because they both had the term ‘Robin’ in the title. There is no other nexus whatsoever.” (In a recent [interview](#) in his New Jersey home, Uslan sat down with Knowledge@Wharton to discuss his views on the movie industry and popular entertainment.)

After he had obtained the film rights, it would be another 10 years before *Batman* was released (in 1989). Along the way, Uslan was repeatedly “down to my last dollar” and began to wonder, “Am I right? Am I just being stubborn?” But he was convinced he was holding on to the right idea.

Finally, Uslan connected with director Tim Burton and production designer Anton Furst. “It was Tim Burton who understood that if we were to do what was revolutionary at the time — the first dark, serious, comic book superhero movie — from the opening frames the audience better believe in Gotham City. If they didn’t, they would never believe there was a guy getting dressed up in a bat suit fighting somebody like the Joker.” Furst created the look of the city based on the screenplay’s description of the metropolis as “Gotham City: As if hell has erupted from under the earth.”

Jack as the Joker

Then came what Uslan described as “the most wonderful day of my life up to that point — when I heard Jack Nicholson was officially hired to play the Joker.” Uslan was on cloud 9. But it didn’t last long. Ten days later, an exec called and asked Uslan about Burton’s idea that Batman be portrayed by Michael Keaton. After spending nine years of his life trying to bring a dark and serious Batman to the screen, the thought of a comedian in the lead role brought back images of the silly “Batman” television show. “Mr. Mom as Batman? I was apoplectic,” Uslan said.

He tried to convince Burton that Keaton wasn’t the right fit for the part. “He’s a comedian. He’s not a serious actor. He’s my height, he doesn’t have the muscles and, by god, he doesn’t have a square jaw,” Uslan remembered arguing. But Burton’s view was that “a square jaw does not a Batman make,” Uslan recalled. The director told him that the story was “not about Batman. This is all about Bruce Wayne. I have to be able to convince an audience — if we want them to believe seriously in a dark superhero — that Bruce Wayne is a guy so obsessed, so driven to the point of being psychotic, that audiences will say, ‘Yeah, that guy would get in a suit like a bat and go out to fight crime.’” Burton also pointed out that, with Nicholson cast as the Joker, they couldn’t get an unknown actor to play Batman because “Nicholson would wipe the screen with him,” Uslan noted. After viewing Keaton’s performance in a rough cut of the as-yet-unreleased *Clean and Sober*, Uslan realized Keaton could pull it off.

And it worked. Uslan points out that the film, which was a “huge, huge success,” has influenced the look and style of all subsequent superhero movies. Indeed, the “*Robin and Marian*” studio executive called to congratulate him on *Batman* saying, “I always said you were a visionary.” This produced Uslan’s next epiphany: “If you don’t believe them when they tell you how terrible you are and how bad your ideas are, then don’t believe them when they tell you how wonderful you are and how great your ideas are. Just continue to believe in yourself and in your work, and you’ll do just great.”

There were missteps along the way, including several films following Burton’s departure from the series — notably *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin* — that were less successful both critically and commercially. Nevertheless, Uslan persisted, and eventually connected with director Christopher Nolan who, with *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, reinvented the series in a way that raised the bar for comic book movies. Nolan changed Burton’s gothic fantasy into a credible world of modern-day horror. As Uslan put it, “When you walk out of *The Dark Knight*, no longer do you have to say ‘That was a great comic book movie.’ You can finally say, ‘This is a great film’”

When he told this tale at New York Comic Con, Uslan looked out at the audience — many of whom were sporting comic book T-shirts or dressed in the costume of their favorite comic book characters — and emphasized that when he was their age, he was “sitting in the same chairs that you are sitting in right now.” He concluded: “If you’ve got the passion, if you’ve got the drive, if you’re willing to [tolerate] a high level of frustration, you can succeed. I was no different than any of you in this room — and if I could do it, there’s no reason you can’t do it.”

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- [Comic Book Resources](#)
- [K@W: Movie Producer Michael Uslan on Superheroes, Comic Books and Why Hollywood Doesn't Get It](#)
- [Superheroes Lives](#)
- [SuperHeroHype Interview with Michael Uslan](#)