DARK KNIGHT RISING

FROM *BATMAN* TO *SIN CITY* TO *300*, NO ONE HAS DONE MORE TO DEFINE THE MODERN HERO THAN GEEK GOD FRANK MILLER.

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"HE IS THE HERO. HE IS EVERYTHING." The man speaking sounds and looks like an evil arch-nemesis, the kind of nutso-obsessive who sits at the head of a long conference table like this one and calls for the head of Superman. "I am absolutely dedicated to finding him," he says. Dressed in bad-guy black from the tip of his fedora to the toe of his scuffed sneakers, he is skeletally gaunt and pale, with a scraggly gravedigger's beard. He gestures with long fingers so bony and crooked you fear they might shoot off electric sparks. "My whole career is built around my search for the hero," he says, arching one eyebrow comically high over a bugged-out, bloodshot eye. "I'm dedicated to figuring out what a hero is."

Intense? Absolutely. Disturbing? Sure. But he's on our side—as dark a knight as Bruce Wayne. After all, Frank Miller is the comics icon who forced Batman to become, as he puts it, "the badass sonofabitch he always should've been" in *The Dark Knight Returns* ("They finally got the title right," he says of Warner Bros.'s new movie). Stephen King called Miller's über-influential deconstruction of *Batman* "the finest piece of comic art ever published." That was 22 years ago, when Miller—who, with fellow legend Alan Moore, changed the course of comics forever—was just getting warmed up.

Sitting in the heart of Miller's not-so-secret Hollywood lair at OddLot Studios—a few yards away from a startlingly realistic copy of his own severed head—the artist/writer/director/auteur repeats his favorite Raymond Chandler quote: "He is the hero, he is everything." Miller likes to sum up every project in one line. *Sin City*'s was "Conan in a trench coat." This quote distills his upcoming solo directing debut *The Spirit*, a stylized update of the 1940s Will Eisner comic about a detective who seemingly comes back from the dead. It says as much about Miller's monomaniacal, hero-worshipping career.

In the 1980s, Miller rebooted the neglected Daredevil, invented the red-hot ninja Elektra, and rehabbed Batman in 1986 as a kind of terrifyingly bleak Greek god of vengeance—a vision that heavily informed both Tim Burton's stylized take and more obviously Christopher Nolan's dark psychodrama, which is once again storming cineplexes this month. In the 1990s, his rough, hyperviolent comics *Ronin, Hard Boiled,* and *Sin City* were adults-only wrecking balls whose plug-ugly thugs and dominatrix babes crashed into cxomics' kid-friendly façade. Recently, blockbusters based on Miller's *Sin City* and especially the ultra-violent Spartans epic *300* blindsided Hollywood pundits who swore R-rated comic book movies would never work. Then, when *300* grossed $457 million worldwide, Frank Miller went from Comic-Con rock-star to Hollywood heavy.

"There's been a massive failure on the part of entertainment to come up with a new generation of heroes." Miller snarls. "Guys are so busy trying so hard not to be guys…Right now, there's a lot of boys out there."

"All that teen, pretty-boy stuff. *The 40-Year-Old Virgins*, it's just not my world," he continues. "Lately, there's been a real lack of that Robert Mitchum masculine force in film. You get these guys who are petty and vengeful. Or just…impotent."

Maybe that's why studios are calling heroes back from retirement, from Rambo and Rocky to Indiana Jones and James Bond: There aren't many young contenders who can knock out the old champs. "That's why Bruce Willis could come back with *Live Free or Die Hard,*" says Miller, "to show these puppies what a real hero can do."

Miller's men have struck a nerve—pissing off knee-jerk feminists and antiwar liberals, thrilling fanboys, and making millions—because he's one of a few storytellers who's figured out a way to create badass sons-of-bitches for the new millennium. And in a summer movie season dominated by Robert Downey Jr.'s alcoholic Iron Man, Ron Perlman's brutish Hellboy, Edward Norton's raging Hulk, Will Smith's down-on-his-luck Hancock, and, especially, Christian Bale's tortured Dark Knight, Miller's aesthetic is reigning supreme. In *300, Sin City,* and *The Dark Knight Returns,* Miller took throwback men's men and made them brutally new. "Right now," he says, grinning like an evil genius hatching a dastardly plan, "I'm the perfect guy in the perfect position."

Welcome to the era of the Frank Miller man. Just as Mickey Spillane, John Wayne, and Sam Peckinpah each ushered in a new kind of American man, Miller has bred his own, new hard-boiled hero. Since we're on the verge of a new era, it's time to define who the hero is.

"Is there a Frank Miller man?" Miller asks. "Yes," he finally answers. "It's my search for a hero, from my *Batman* where he was this obsessive-compulsive terrifying figure, to *Sin City* where they have that one ➤➤

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moment in life where they have to rise and become something greater than they thought they could be—to *300* where the heroism is screaming across the screen."

Miller has spent as much time as Lex Luthor studying heroes. So I ask him to explain what he's learned. In a long, intense, often prickly conversation, Miller gradually divulges his hero's identity. As he does, his hero slowly comes into focus, stomping out from the shadows of noir, the fog of war, and the black nights of Gotham and Sin City. Below, the 10 rules of the Frank Miller man:

1. The hero sacrifices everything.

Miller's origin story goes like this: Born in 1957, he grows up in Maryland and Vermont with three brothers and three sisters as a self-described "maladjusted child," obsessed with comics. At age six, he meets his destiny. Instead of being bit by a radioactive spider, he turns on the TV and gets bit by the old film *The 300 Spartans*. "It changed the way I looked at heroes entirely," remembers Miller, who decided then and there to pursue a life in ink. "It stopped being the fresh-faced guys who get medals on their chests at the end of *Star Wars*. It became people who were willing to sacrifice everything for the greater good." The lesson stuck with him: "One of the most heroic movies I ever saw was *Rocky,* a guy who lasts 15 rounds before he loses a fight."

2. The hero is fearless.

At the age of 20, fresh out of art school and dreaming of the great comic book houses of New York, Miller moved to the Big Apple. He stalked editors, begged for critiques, and banged out work-for-hire at $25 a page. Within two years, writing and drawing such projects as the *Twilight Zone* and *Spider-Man*, he was a rising star, pleading for a shot at his own series. Marvel gave him a chance, and he responded by reinventing a 15-year-old comic series about a blind lawyer who moonlights as a vigilante. The tagline for *Daredevil* was "The man without fear!"—and Miller rooted his hero's power in our universal fear: the dark. "What little kid, five or six years old, hasn't gone around the house with the eyes closed and hands out?" Miller asks. "That's the *Daredevil* fantasy." Before long, Miller was slaughtering sacred cows as a matter of course, reinventing Wolverine, Batman and—with *Sin City* and *300*—the entire genres. Miller was a comic book hero in his own right.

3. The hero does nothing small.

Miller grew up in small towns dreaming of Gotham, Metropolis, and planet-hopping superheroes. "It's all got to happen on a grand scale," explains Miller, whose first became famous for his crime-fiction influences and later his wild style of slashing lines, abstract action and Jackson Pollock-like splatter. "C'mon, Superman is ridiculous—he has blue hair, he can fly. It can't just be, 'This guy's having a bad day.' If Daredevil has a nervous breakdown, people are going to get hit."

4. The hero loves women of all kinds: Blondes, brunettes, redheads, dominatrices, strippers, hookers...

From his earliest strips to the strippers of *Sin City,* Miller's heroes have been surrounded by beautiful, often nude, women. Why? Because, like many school-age outcasts, Miller has always loved to draw hot girls. "When you have a brush in your hand, inking a beautiful wom is a lot like running your hands over her," Miller says. "It turns me on, OK?"

Over the years, Miller has caught some flak for drawing so many hookers and lookers, but the actresses who have worked with him, from Rosario Dawson to Jessica Alba, all defend him. "Frank is a gentleman and his women are bad-ass," says Jaime King. A close friend of Miller's, she says he was "incredibly protective" of on the sets of both *Sin City* and *The*

Spirit. "In *Sin City,* they may be hookers but they're not just being fucked and left for dead. They're the law of the town, keeping shit together."

5. The hero fights dirty and looks ugly.

A Frank Miller man is nasty when he needs to be: He fights dirty, uses his fists, and knows how to take a beating. He's not the clean-cut Captain America type. He's almost always some nasty-looking, hulking freak that's half-human, half-rhino. Miller's Batman is a pink-fleshed Hulk. *Sin City*'s brutish Marv is Miller's take on a modern-day barbarian. "If I go for a strong guy" he says. "I want him to be ugly."

Miller likes the rough image for himself, too. He's earned a reputation within the industry for being ferociously demanding, a quality mirrored in his heroes. "Frank talks about his characters as if they won't let him go until they've told him their stories," says *300* director Zack Snyder. "The only characters that survive are the ones that are tough enough to fight back. Maybe that's why he ends up with the hardest and scariest."

6. The hero has a reason, but he doesn't need therapy.

"When I first got going on what became *Dark Knight,* I just thought about him a lot, what kind of guy would do this stuff," he says of his endlessly influential 1986 reinvention of *Batman.* That said, Miller says he's sick of "therapy culture" and hand-wringing heroes like Spider-man who go around whining all the time about the burden of great power. In *300,* Sparta's King Leonidas didn't have to ponder the Persian Empire's diplomacy—he kicked Xerxes's diplomat down a well.

7. The hero is chivalrous. But he doesn't talk about it.

Miller didn't revive the "Dark Knight" moniker by accident; he believes fiercely in old-school chivalry. And he created the debauched borough of *Sin City* in 1991 to show that old-fashioned values endure, no matter how corrupt the environment. "Without vice there is no virtue," he says. "I like to refer to a hard-boiled hero as a knight in blood-caked armor."

8. The hero is the ultimate romantic.

Miller grew up loving Alfred Hitchcock nearly as much as comic book

legend Jack Kirby—and he tried to make it in Hollywood in the late 1980s. He even scripted *RoboCop 2* and *3*, but the experience soured him, until Robert Rodriguez offered him a co-directing credit on *Sin City* a decade later. "One of my favorite lines is when Marv is about to kill the priest," says Snyder. "The priest [played by Frank Miller] says, 'You'd better ask yourself if this whore is worth dying for.' Marv says, 'Worth killing for, worth dying for. Worth going to hell for.' While he's shooting him."

9. The hero is hated and misunderstood.

Miller has always been a controversial figure. The more popular he becomes, the more he seems to piss off colleagues, infuriate fans, and confound expectations–because he's always restlessly pursuing some new direction. In Miller's universe, superheroes are outlawed and ostracized—there are no trophies. "Community approval isn't the motive for a hero anyway," he says. "It's the motive for a politician. A hero does the right thing because it's the right thing."

10. The hero believes in good and evil.

Miller's *300* became a lightning rod for criticism since many read it as an endorsement of the war on terror, the West versus the Middle East. "I did this comic in the 1990s, so I never could have expected that it would get the best reaction from hawks," laughs Miller. "I did *300* years before 9/11, but you don't have to read much between the lines to see that I believe that there is good and that there is evil. As the great cartoonist Wallace Wood said, it's the job of the good guys to kill the bad guys."

The Next Hero

Miller has defined a new formula for men's men, says Snyder. "Marv and Leonidas and Batman are written like the same guy: this uncompromising, unapologetic, hard, physical dude that finds his purpose, and often that purpose is gonna bring him to his own demise, or close to it, often in some beautifully cathartic sacrifice."

Restless, Miller is looking for new heroes. He's working on *Sin City 2,* another film along the lines of *300,* and possibly an adaptation of his cyber-slugfest *Hard Boiled.* Enraged by 9/11, he's been working furiously on a no-holds-barred project, originally called *Holy Terror!,* in which he planned to have Batman literally kick Al Qaeda's ass. Right now Miller is putting the final touches on *The Spirit,* by his old friend, the late Eisner. "To be true to *The Spirit*—these puns are inevitable by the way," he jokes, "I had to do what Eisner did—approach this project with the most advanced tech of the time."

Miller still draws in his Hell's Kitchen studio on an antique lightboard surrounded by old Spartan shields, toys, and model cars, but Robert Rodriguez hooked him on CGI. His updated *Spirit* will be as stylish and CGI-heavy as *Sin City,* but it will remain true to the old-school appeal of a blue-suited detective who pursues the evil Octopus (Samuel L. Jackson)—and a harem of beautiful women (Eva Mendes, Jaime King, Scarlett Johansson, and others). The Spirit is, in many ways, a classic Miller hero: chivalrous, moral, brutal, and he can take a beating. But he's also dapper, played by square-jawed actor Gabriel Macht. "He's my interpretation of Eisner's heroic," Miller says. "He's not as ugly a hero as I usually come up with."

Actors working on the film say the Spirit is closer to Miller than any of his previous heroes. "Frank's image is scary—he's very mysterious-looking," says his producer, Deborah Del Prete. "But when people meet him they're surprised that, like The Spirit, he's got that gentleman-to-women thing. And Frank *loves* women."

"Frank was like a kid in a candy store," says Macht. "And, like the Spirit, he's a klutz. One day, he was showing me how to do this punch—he pulled his fist back and accidentally punched himself in the face."

Miller *is* a bit like the Spirit. They both love beautiful women, big old cars, and Converse All Stars. ("If you're going to jump around on rooftops," Miller rationalizes, "you need something with a little tread.")

"Frank filters that most basic hero through himself, through that voice," says Snyder. "They're always so flawed and personal that we're able to look at his heroes and go, 'That's me.' Or at least I wish that was me. Superman? I *know* that's not me."

Like many of us, Miller isn't so much a hero himself as a guy who can't stop dreaming about heroes—can't stop thinking about that tough guy in that suit, with that beautiful babe in the passenger seat, driving that big old car toward some final showdown. Miller loves classic cars, but admits that, as a true New Yorker, he doesn't even drive. But if he could draw himself into a car, he knows just what it would be.

"A '53 Cadillac," he says, with a smile. "Eldorado…in cream." ●

Page to Screen
Whether directing, writing, or inspiring, Frank Miller has left his mark on Hollywood.

Sin City (2005) Director Robert Rodriguez never had it so easy. *Sin City*'s storyboards were ripped from the graphic novels, and hardcore fans can follow the flick panel by panel.

300 (2006) Adapted from Miller's '98 graphic novel, the hit movie featured some unfortunate additions. . . like a giant troll.

The Dark Knight (2008) Pre-Miller's epic *The Dark Night Returns,* Batman was associated with Adam West's campy antics rather than Christian Bale's gritty vigilant.
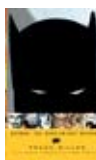
The Spirit (2008) In his solo directorial debut, Miller is reimagining Will Eisner's iconic comic into a *Sin-City*-esque film noir about a crime fighter come back from the dead.