

# Frank Miller!

## An Introduction

I recall committing **Frank Miller's** name to memory sometime around 1983 or 1984. That's kind of a late start considering Miller had already become a household name to comic book readers through his work on **Daredevil** by then. But I had never read any of his Daredevil work. I was 15 or 16 at that time, and had just really gotten into comics thanks to my brother Jason (six years my younger), who began buying books at the local 7-11. At that time, my brother was pretty much a **Marvel** boy and brought home **X-Men**, **Fantastic Four**, **The Hulk**, and **Spiderman** (who I have never liked - even to this day!) I started thumbing through my brother's growing collection and before long I was hooked.

That's not to say I hadn't read a comic book before. My uncle Frank worked for **Time/Life** in Manhattan as an elevator operator for 44 years (yes, FORTY FOUR YEARS!!). Somehow, through his job, he had a "connection", and was able to get comic books for free and would bring them home for my cousin and I to read (uncle Frank enjoyed them too). That was really the first time I ever saw Miller's work, though I didn't know it at the time. I distinctly remember the cover, and some of the story, to **Daredevil 158** (May 1979), Miller's first issue as penciler. If you're one of the 5 people who don't have the image etched in your brain, it's the cover where we see Daredevil in a graveyard about to be pounced upon from behind by **Death-Stalker**. It's a wonderfully classic cover that I'm fond of to this day (**Miller/Rubenstein**). Anyway, while that particular issue of Daredevil left some kind of impression on me at the time, I don't remember taking note of the penciler.

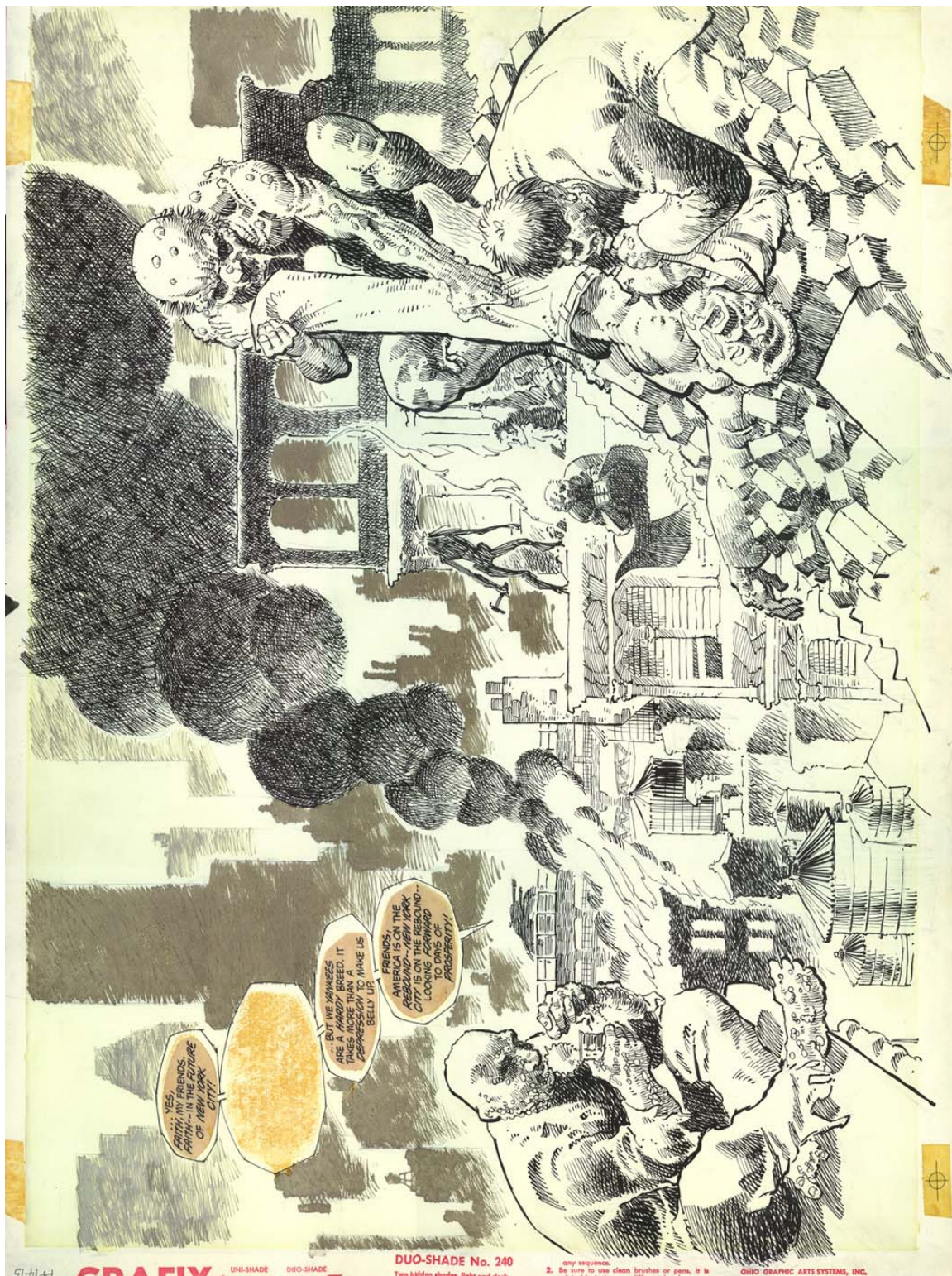
Fast-forward to a few years later and I'm hooked on comics. So, I go out to a local comic book shop one day to see what they have that my local 7-11 does not. I wind up at Port Comics (Port Jefferson, NY - now defunct), and find myself digging through the back issue bins. My primary reason for

going through the back issues was to find all the **Fantastic Four** issues drawn by **John Byrne** (my favorite artist and title at the time). While I was there, I decided to pick out some new stuff too. I looked around and just grabbed a few copies of whatever looked cool. Aside from picking up the mainstream stuff I was reading, I distinctly remember grabbing issues of **Cerebus**, **American Flagg**, **Moonshadow**, and a very cool looking thing called **Ronin**.

Ronin, a six-issue limited series, was originally published in July of 1983. At the time I discovered it, it was already in the back issue bins and I was able to grab all 6 issues at once. (I was recently discussing Ronin with a fellow collector who described the frustration they felt at the time it was published because the last book was so late. Fortunately, I didn't have to deal with this problem!) Ronin tells the tale of a boy named **Billy Challas**; a quadriplegic who works for a bio-chemical corporation in a futuristic New York. Billy is troubled by dreams of a Ronin (a master-less samurai) who must wander the land until he can avenge his master's murder. The story switches between Miller's dystopic view of the future (something we'd see again in **Dark Knight Returns**) and feudal Japan. I found Miller's blend of old world Japan juxtaposed with a grim, not-too-distant future, completely compelling. The book was so original that I constantly found myself thinking "where the hell is Miller going with this?!"

It's obvious that Miller put everything he had into Ronin. After all, it was creator-owned (a first for him), and a chance to do anything he wanted, no holds barred. He no longer had to worry about presenting a story in the mainstream superhero format; he could be as dynamic and creative as his abilities would allow. The story he came up with was a complete departure from not only his previous superhero titles, but also mainstream comics in general. It was a bold vision and, for the first time, showed a very wide audience what comics *could* do.





Ronin double page spread, issue one, pages 14 and 15. This piece was done on one piece of Duo-shade board. Miller's very distinct drawing and inking style, which we see throughout the series is evident throughout.



Not only was the story a departure for Miller from his earlier works, but also the art style was completely different than what people were accustomed to seeing from him. The art on Ronin is easily the best of Miller's career. The quality of the work, and the fact that he didn't allow anyone else to ink it, speaks volumes to what he was trying to achieve. He wrote, penciled and inked the entire series himself and it was painstakingly colored by **Lynn Varley** and lettered by **John Costanza**. Frank and Lynn were so concerned with the color that they frequently visited the printers who were going to be doing the printing. This would be the first time a comic was printed in the new "prestige" format and Frank wanted to make sure it was done right. The new format used a better quality paper that allowed the colors to be much more subtle than your everyday comic, and helped convey the many moods of the book.

Ronin was cleverly marketed as it was given to various people in the industry to pre-read and to solicit reviews. As a result, the back cover to each issue was loaded with praise from anybody who was anybody in the industry at the time, hailing it as one of the most important events in comic book history. Here are a few of those comments:

*"Only someone similarly involved in the same sort of venture can appreciate the ability, dedication, and sheer unadulterated sweat that results in Frank Miller's Ronin series. Frank has solidly set both his feet on the path that comic books must take, if the medium is to rise to its fullest potential. The work in Ronin exemplifies the creativity and effort that will be a watermark for publications to follow. An exciting book in an exciting time for our industry."* **Joe Kubert**

*"First impressions are valuable. I saw the proofs here at DC. They were being gone over by Frank and Lynn and some production people. There were some oohs and ahhs, all expected. But there was something else...shocked silence. I was one of those silently shaking my head. Ronin has set a standard. No other book of this kind will ever be produced without referring to Ronin. It is as much a starting point as D. W. Griffith ripping the camera off the floor it was nailed to and showing*

*generations of movie makers that movies...moved."* **Ernie Colon**

*"Frank has not only attempted to advance the comics form, but has succeeded. Ronin is a beautiful blend of words, drawings, and color."* **Marv Wolfman**

High praise indeed! I may not be as knowledgeable as some of Frank's contemporaries who heaped praise on him back then, but the book left as much an impression on me as it did them. At that time, Ronin was simply the best comic book I'd ever read. To this day, whenever I find myself listing my favorite comics, Ronin usually takes a spot in the top 5 (along with some of Frank's other works, but I'll get to that later). If you haven't read this series, I highly recommend it (so do Joe Kubert, Ernie Colon, and Marv Wolfman, among others!).

As far as I know, Frank has kept the art for all six issues except for the first book, which apparently, was given as a gift to someone at DC. Pages from that issue have been on the market in recent years, and I was able to pick up a few pieces – a dream come true for me, and some of my favorite pieces in my collection. The originals are incredible to see in person. I owned 6 Ronin pieces at one time and sold 3 of them. I have a feeling that I'll someday wonder why I ever let them go.

### **A Very Good Year**

When all is said and done, 1986 might be the best year in Frank Miller's career. It saw the publication of 3 of his best works. The first is a story about a superhero whose identity is, unknowingly to him, revealed to his worst enemy. The second, about an aging crime fighter who comes out of retirement, and the third about a Ninja who wants to kill the future president of the United States of America.



The first Born Again page I picked up by the great David Mazzucchelli features Daredevil battling it out with Nuke while the Kingpin looks on. This page has the great first person dialog that Miller does so well. We are inside DD's head experiencing things through his perspective creating a very visceral reaction.

For the first story, Miller would make a triumphant return to Daredevil, the title that garnered him so much popularity only a few years earlier. *Apocalypse* (Daredevil 227), kicked off a collaboration with the somewhat unknown, but super-talented David Mazzucchelli. In this 7-issue story arc, Daredevil would be completely deconstructed and put back together in Miller's own unique way (this series was eventually published in TPB format under the title *Born Again*). Unlike Miller's earlier work on Daredevil, which is somewhat dated and adolescent, *Born Again* is a more mature work which reads as good today as it did 20 years ago.

The thing that makes *Born Again*, and many of Miller's other works so compelling, is that it seems to take a more realistic look at comic book heroes. Miller seems to ask himself the "What if...?" questions as he writes. *What if Daredevil were real? What would his world be like? How would he do the things he does? WHY would he do the things he does?* In *Born Again*, Miller asks, "What happens to a man who has everything taken away from him?". The answer we get is both profound and fitting for the character; Daredevil learns that a man without hope is a man without fear.

This is another saga that always ends up in my top 5 listing, and I've been fortunate enough to pick up a few nice pages. Mazzucchelli became one of my favorite comic book artists as soon as I first saw his pre-Miller work on Daredevil (with Denny O'Neil scripting). Oddly, he hasn't done much in comics outside that series (apart from his other collaboration with Miller – I'll get to that too!).

Miller's second work of 1986 was a little-known story called *The Dark Knight Returns* (ha!). I don't know what I can write about that series that hasn't already been written before. It was original, innovative, shocking, and a hell of a lot of fun. I remember reading that series over and over and over. Man was it good. The story was obviously top-notch, and the art was just as good. Miller collaborated once again with **Klaus Janson**, the phenomenal inker from his Daredevil days. All that previous work together must have paid off because they

were firing on all cylinders on this series. Well, in the beginning anyway... I've heard stories of Miller not being too happy with Janson's inks on the later issues. Apparently, Janson had fallen behind and recruited others to help him with the inking chores (oddly enough, Todd McFarlane was one of them). Miller would eventually re-ink entire sections of the book out of frustration. I prefer the pages from the earlier issues that were clearly inked by Janson, to the later issues, which were inked by Miller and God knows who else. Still, I'd take ANY page from this series at this point! It's a gaping hole in my collection that needs filling. Seems there were a slew of these pages on ebay in recent years but the well seems to have gone dry. If anybody can hook me up...finders fee happily paid!! ☺

Miller's third important work of 1986 was *Elektra: Assassin*. Here, for the first time, Miller gives his full attention to the character he created and winds up with one of the most complex and interesting stories in his catalog. This is likely due, in no small part, to his collaborator on that series, Bill Sienkiewicz.

Sienkiewicz started life in comics as a **Neal Adams** clone but quickly found his own style which could be at times refined and realistic, and at others frenetic and cartoony. Bill is an artist's artist, with daunting capabilities, which he brings to bear in the series, often shaping the story in ways Miller could not have possibly envisioned. The artwork for *Elektra: Assassin* is fully painted by Sienkiewicz in many different styles. When we see Elektra as a small girl, the images are rendered in a very simple way with flat, solid colors. As scenes change, and the intricacies of the story emerge, Sienkiewicz starts layering in complex colors and textures. At other times, to convey a specific mood, he switches gears and illustrates entire panels in pencil only.





Great splash page from *Elektra*: Assassin by the incomparable Bill Sienkiewicz.

Sienkiewicz has described his collaboration with Miller on the series like performing jazz – each creator “riffing” off the other until the sum of the parts created a greater whole. I was again fortunate in being able to find a few good pieces from this series. I have been keeping an eye out for pages for the last few years and good ones are hard to find. Prices too seem to be rising, and the better pages can be fairly expensive. Albert Moy and Mitch Itkowitz had a bunch of these pages a few years back, but they all seemed to have vanished mysteriously one day. Funny how Albert auctions off a “new” page nearly every other month or so...! Hmmm.....???

### Batman Revisited

Once Miller had given the Dark Knight Detective a proper ending, he saw fit to give him a “new” beginning. 1987 saw the release of another collaboration with David Mazzucchelli on **Batman: Year One** (Batman 404-407), a re-telling of the origin of the greatest crime fighter Gotham City would ever know. Year One starts with Lieutenant James Gordon transferring to Gotham city at the same time Bruce Wayne is returning home after 12 years of traveling abroad. Their lives will soon become entwined in ways neither can imagine.

Rather than altering the Batman origin, Miller instead adds a depth to the telling, a trademark of all his works. In Year One, Miller again uses one of his most compelling techniques as a storyteller - he puts us inside the mind of the protagonist. Many of his stories are written in the first person – we empathize not only with the heroes but the smaller characters (Jim Gordon) or even the villains (Kingpin etc.). This is done to great effect in Year One as the storytelling alternates between the struggles of Bruce Wayne to become something more than what he is, and the struggle of Jim Gordon to deal with not only a corrupt police force, but also a masked vigilante.

None of the artwork for Batman: Year One has been made available with the exception of the cover to Batman 405. I know many people (myself included) eagerly wait for these pages to hit the market. It will be a feeding frenzy...!!!

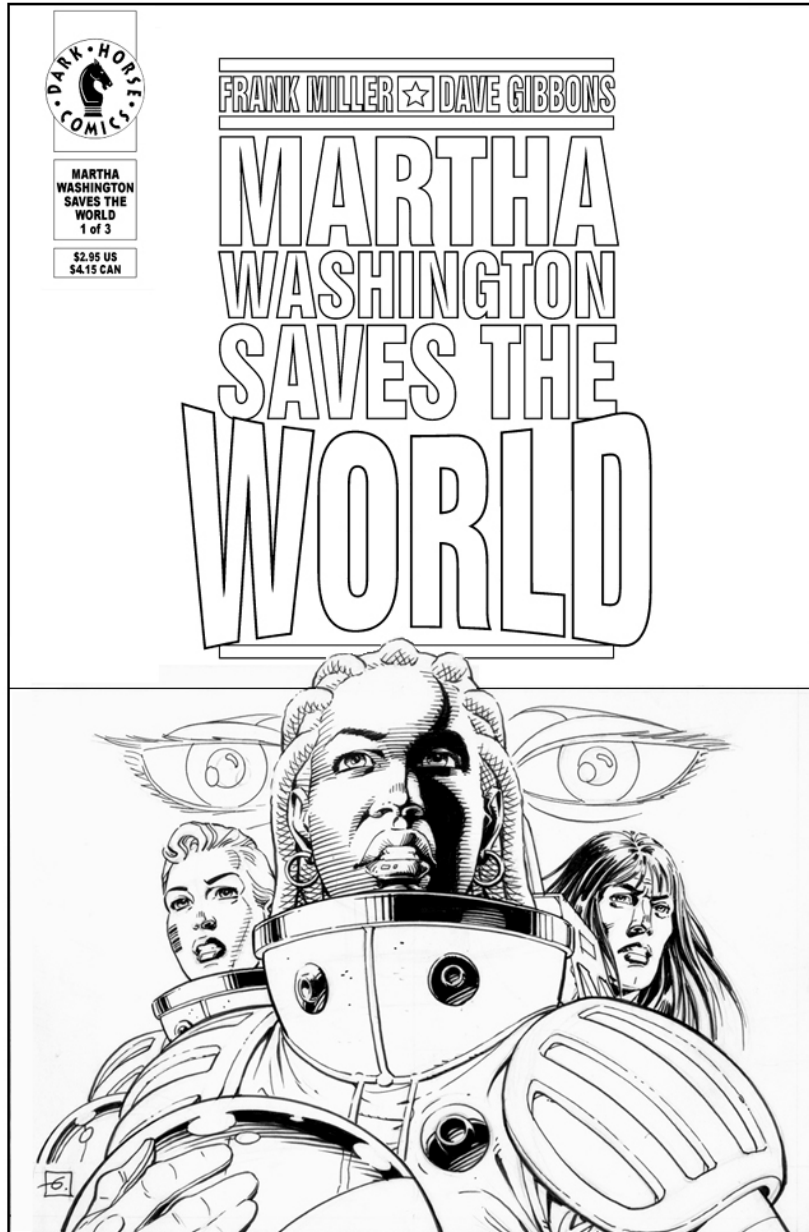
If Miller had stopped working in comics in 1987, he would still be considered one of the most important and influential comic creators of all time. But he didn't stop. He went on to do more great works like *Elektra Lives Again*, *Hard Boiled*, *Give Me Liberty*, *Daredevil: Man Without Fear*, *Sin City*, *Big Guy and Rusty the Robot*, and *300* (not a bad looking resume). I've chosen to restrict this article to my favorite works by Miller, and also series that I collect art from. I am always interested in art from Miller works, so if you have any for sale, drop me a line.

### San Diego Comic-Con 2006

The Con has returned to my back yard here in San Diego. I'm looking forward once again to seeing friends from around the globe, and as always, seeing what the dealers will be bringing to the show. If this year is like last, I expect to see most of the same art from earlier years, but with higher prices! I no longer go to the convention expecting to pick up any art. I do have some cash reserves in case something pops up, but I'm guessing there won't be anything.

Friday night will be the APA dinner, and the first in a long time without **Bob Koppany** hosting. He will be missed (that guy knows how to throw a party!!). Hopefully, he'll show up to the dinner, and let us buy him dinner for once. For those of you who can't be with us – you will be missed too. I'm sure some shutterfly will chronicle the whole thing for you to see. Until next time...! TM

.....Okay, so my article is late and the Con is now over. Had a great time at the APA dinner though I do miss Bob's shindigs. Great fun hanging out with Benno, Danker, Steve Stein, and birthday boy Gary Land (who should *never* be allowed to drink). Went to the 300 panel so I could get Mr. Miller to sign some of my art. That guy does not look too good!! He looked like a man of 80 who didn't quite have all his marbles. I put my Ronin DPS and another page in front of him to sign, and I'm not sure he even recognized what it was. Must have been the party the night before! Hope he takes better care of himself... The End.



*A recent pickup – a Dave Gibbons cover to one of Miller's books.*