Dick Grayson,
Boy Wonder

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Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder

Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing and Batman

Edited by Kristen L. Geaman

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Introduction

The Sensational Character Find of 1940

Kristen L. Geaman

The cover of *Detective Comics* #38 (April 1940) proudly proclaimed that Robin, the Boy Wonder, was that sensational character find. Within that issue, readers were introduced to Dick Grayson, acrobat and trapeze artist, who became Robin. For over forty years, Dick Grayson and Robin were as synonymous as Bruce Wayne and Batman, but in the mid–1980s, Robin became a legacy identity when Dick moved on to a new heroic alter ego and a new young man took his place as Batman's devoted sidekick. The year 2015 thus marks a double anniversary: seventy-five years of both Robin the sidekick and Dick Grayson, the boy who started it all.

So why a book just about Dick Grayson? For starters, Dick Grayson, the original and longest-running Robin, "the Boy Wonder," started the phenomenon of the kid sidekick, which is now a well-established and (for some) well-loved superhero motif. Simply put, no Dick Grayson-Robin means no sidekicks.[1]

But Dick is so much more than the sidekick that started it all. Robin became an integral part of the Batman mythos, from both a financial and storytelling standpoint. Robin's debut, in *Detective Comics* #38, doubled the book's sales.[2] For the next thirty years, the Dynamic Duo was virtually inseparable; even now in the cultural lexicon, Batman and Robin go together as naturally as peanut butter and jelly.

Over the years Dick matured and aged, eventually outgrowing the iconic short pants and pixie boots. Using the name Nightwing, Dick was one of the first sidekicks to mature into an independent hero. Growing up is hard to do for a comic-book character (Dick debuted in 1940 but didn't go off to college until December 1969), but Dick led the way with grace and increasing popularity among fans. In the wake of Dick's transformation,

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other child sidekicks would take on new, grown-up superhero identities, which paved the way for new generations of heroes.

Dick reached the pinnacle of his personal growth when he served as Batman from 2009 until 2011. In the wake of his father-figure/mentor Bruce Wayne's apparent death, Dick took over the role of Batman as well as the role of guardian to his younger brother, Bruce Wayne's recently-discovered biological son Damian Wayne. Dick had come full circle. In addition, Dick's stint as Batman marks him as one of the few former sidekicks to successfully inherit his mentor's mantle.

In 2011, DC Comics rebooted their entire line of comics and Dick returned to his Nightwing identity. Given that Dick had successfully come-of-age twice, it has become somewhat of a joke among Nightwing fans that DC had to reboot their entire universe just to make Dick Nightwing again. While almost certainly untrue, the sentiment highlights Dick's extraordinary character growth: he had achieved a moral, intellectual, and social resolution that surpassed even that of the Batman.

Throughout his history, Dick Grayson has been an integral part of one of the most famous and financially successful franchises in history. Dick has also repeatedly been on the cutting edge of developments in superhero comics, starting with his inception as the first sidekick and continuing to his adoption of Batman's cowl. But the character can also serve as a lens for viewing the world outside of comics, whether it be moral development,[3] the homoerotic, or gendered readership. Dick Grayson is not simply a one-note sidekick but one of the most complex and developed characters in comics.

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Surprisingly, especially given the interest in studies of popular culture, Grayson has received scant scholarly attention. Grayson has been connected with Batman for all but the Bat's first eleven months (May 1939 to March 1940), but, even if scholars are not deliberately excluding Robin from consideration, they tend to select topics of inquiry that focus on Batman alone. Those already familiar with the character will note that Grayson played a large role in a number of team books, such as *Teen Titans* and *The New Teen Titans*. Unfortunately, these books have received little scholarly attention. Dick has a large role in various encyclopedic works on these teams, but the purpose of such works has not been to engage in critical analysis.[4]

This work seeks to begin a scholarly dialogue about Dick Grayson. Dick's legacy, and the legacy of Robin, are every bit as vital and vibrant as that of Batman. It is time to give them their due.

As the first foray into scholarship devoted to the back-half of "Batman

and," this book covers Dick's entire seventy-five-year career while still leaving room for future scholarly exploration. The first section is devoted to Dick's time as Robin, featuring an informative account of Dick's early history; an exploration of Robin in the 1970s, which highlights a number of developments that would bear fruit in later decades; a look at the significance of the Robin costume in the development of an individualized, fully-developed character; and an examination of what it means to be Robin through the lens of performance.

The second section examines one of the most important relationships in all of comic books: Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne. While there is a special relationship between Batman and each of his Robins, it is undeniable that Dick and Bruce have a connection that goes beyond even that. As Bruce's closest companion in the war on crime, Dick occupies a unique niche in the Batman world. Bruce occupies pride of place in Dick's world as the man who gave him a home and taught him how to be a hero. The essays in this section explore not only how much Bruce and Dick have contributed to each other's character development, but also how these two embody important literary and historical trends.

The third section moves to a different time in Dick's life: his transition from childhood to adulthood, with a special focus on Dick's post–Robin character development (in both the pre-reboot and rebooted canon) and various coming-of-age stories.

The fourth section returns to Dick's relationships, an integral part of a character who is considered the center of the DC Universe.[5] Various essays explore Dick's interactions with some of the most important people in his life, ranging from Alfred Pennyworth, Dick's Robin brothers, and the Teen Titans. This section ends with a look at Dick Grayson in the works of Frank Miller, offering fans a chance to re-evaluate Miller's contributions and perhaps appreciate his take on Dick Grayson and his relationship with Bruce in a new way. The book continues with insightful interviews from some of the most influential writers of *Nightwing*, and ends with a moving tribute that illustrates just how deeply this character has touched fans.

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With such a rich history, one book could never fully cover the many facets of Dick Grayson. Just some of the avenues open for further research include the topic of Dick and representation (he is part Romani), Dick as a leader, further exploration of Dick as Batman, and Dick beyond the pages of comic books. Dick Grayson has appeared in multiple media, including television, movies, and radio. He has also featured in both live-action and

animated shows and movies. His role as a cultural icon stretches well beyond the world of comic books. Future scholarship on this character in his many guises will not only give us added understanding of the humanistic merit of comic books but also of the role this medium occupies in our wider culture.

Dick Grayson, and the entire Batman Family, are worthy of much greater consideration in both scholarship and pop culture. These characters have added immeasurably to the Batman mythos, creating stories with far greater depth and nuance than one lone avenger of the night could ever sustain on his own. It is our fervent hope that this book encourages scholarship on the Batman Family (emphasis on the Family) for decades to come.

Timeline

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May 1939: Bruce Wayne debuts as Batman in *Detective Comics* #27

April 1940: Dick Grayson is orphaned and debuts as Robin in *Detective Comics* #38

- Fans traditionally hold that Dick was 8–10 when he became Robin, but the comics never give an explicit age. Dick's age is extremely fluid for 30 years; he is always "young."

1943: Alfred Pennyworth arrives in *Batman* #16 (April 1943)

1947–1952: Dick has his own solo Robin series in *Star Spangled Comics* (issues #65–130)

1964: The Teen Titans debut in *The Brave and the Bold* #54 (July 1964)

1969: Dick Grayson leaves home to attend college at Hudson University in *Batman* #217 (December 1969)

1978: The original incarnation of the Teen Titans ends with issue #53 (February 1978)

1980: Dick drops out of college and begins leading the New Teen Titans

February 1984: Dick passes on the Robin mantle to Jason Todd in *Batman* #368

July 1984: Dick debuts as Nightwing in *Tales of the Teen Titans* #44

1985: The DC-wide event *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which reboots the DC Universe. This is the source of the continuity shorthands pre–*Crisis* and post–*Crisis*, which are used to help explain some of the many contradictions inherent in continuously-published serial works. Some backstories were also deliberately changed with this reboot. Of concern to Dick:

- Alfred has been the Wayne butler for years, meaning his arrival in Bruce's life predates Dick's (a reversal of what occurred in the 1940s).

- Jason Todd, the second Robin, receives a complete character overhaul.
- Dick's transition to Nightwing is altered.

1994: Dick leaves the Titans in *The New Titans* #114 (September 1994)
1994: Dick serves as Batman while Bruce recovers from injuries; *Prodigal* storyline from November 1994 to January 1995
1995: Dick has a solo miniseries (September–December)
October 1996–April 2009: Dick has a solo *Nightwing* series that runs for 153 issues, 2 annuals, and various specials
2009–2011: Dick Grayson serves as Batman, with Damian Wayne as his Robin
2011: DC's *New 52* reboots the entire DC Universe, creating the DCnU (new). Dick has a *Nightwing* solo series that last for 30 issues and 1 annual
2014: After Nightwing's secret identity is revealed in the miniseries *Forever Evil*, Dick becomes a secret agent working for Spyral. He has a currently ongoing series titled *Grayson*, which began in September 2014.

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Notes

1. Glen Cadigan, *Titans Companion* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2005), 7. It is possible that Dick-Robin might simply be the best known early sidekick. See Joshua R. Pangborn's article in this volume for more.
2. Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2000, 2005), 59.
3. Carsten Fogh Nielsen, "Leaving the Shadow of the Bat: Aristotle, Kant, and Dick Grayson on Moral Education," in *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*, ed. by Mark D. White and Robert Arp (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 254–268.
4. Such as Cadigan, *Titans Companion*.
5. C.F. Arnold, "Nightwing is the Centre of the (DC) Universe," *Comics Are Dead* (24 March 2010), http://comicsaredead.yolasite.com/reviews-news/nightwing-is-the-centre-of-the-dc-universe.

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