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Batman: The Animated Series

JOE SUTLIFF SANDERS, 2021

Detroit, Wayne State University Press

pp. xi + 111, bibliography, and index, £18.50 (paper)

Batman: The Animated Series (BTAS) remains of the most celebrated and highly regarded iterations of Batman, not just on the small screen but in any media adaptation. While this book is quite short, author Joe Sutliff Sanders delves into *BTAS* and examines the aesthetics and key themes, and argues that *BTAS* is still a key influence on the Batman franchise today.

The book has three main chapters. The first chapter, 'The Shadow of the World's Fair', examines the visual aesthetics of the *BTAS*, and the creation of the 'Dark Deco' style that encapsulates the dark, gloomy, geometric, and streamlined visuals of Gotham. In this chapter Sanders performs close textual analysis of *BTAS*, and frequently uses images and figures to aid the reader in following his argument. While there is interesting discussion about the influence of Art Deco, and the 'lingering present', the art and visual styles of the Batman comics are never discussed. This gives the impression that the *BTAS* visual aesthetic was an entirely new creation, rather than an adaptation from a pre-existing visual medium.

The second chapter focuses on how *BTAS* frames wealth and the 'simpling elite'. Sanders argues that 'the show portrays wealth as connected to not just foolishness but cruelty' (p. 48). Textual analysis is the main methodology here as well, with in-depth analysis of certain key episodes which revolve around the wealthy classes of Gotham. While at first it seems like Sanders might be making an argument about capitalism and corruption, lining this to wider socio-economic issues, ultimately he links the discussion back to Batman as a character. The conclusion ruminates that Batman is a hero because of the pain he has experienced, rather than because of his wealth.

The third and final chapter, 'Harley Quinn, Victimhood, and Blame', looks at Harley Quinn, a new character created for the series. Here Sanders considers 1990s feminism, and how Harley fits into debates around 'victimhood' and 'empowerment' that comprised some feminist debate at the time. Alongside textual analysis, Sanders also uses discourse analysis at points in this chapter, including comments from audience members discussing their take on Harley Quinn's relationship with the Joker. Harley's duality as both villain and victim is the key argument here, and the murkiness of her status is examined from multiple angles.

While there is in-depth and detailed discussion of how *BTAS* links to wider social and political themes, and aesthetic/architectural styles, this book also gives the impression that *BTAS* emerged from a media vacuum, separate from preceding Batman comics or other animated series. There are minor references to the comics and *Batman Beyond*, but more contextualisation about where *BTAS* fit within the wider Batman franchise and canon would have strengthened Sanders' argument about the influence and impact of the programme.

But despite this, overall the book has many strengths. *BTAS* has been previously overlooked in academic scholarship, and Sanders covers this popular adaptation from a number of angles. His use of deep textual analysis to discuss wider socio-cultural themes present in *BTAS* is very competent and raises interesting ideas and questions. The approach and writing style is accessible to a wide audience, and fans of the batman franchise, as well as those interested in animation, will find reading this book a rewarding experience.

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