Real men don't get scared...or do they? Mick Cooper contends that fear is fundamental to men's real experience.

David Collins

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE BAT

I must have been about nine at the time. I'd been to the cinema to see The Mask of Zorro with my parents. We were walking back to our car when suddenly a man stepped out from a doorway. He pointed a gun at us and told my mum to give him her necklace. My mum didn't want to because it was so precious to her. He tried to grab it, my dad lunged at him, and he shot my dad point-blank dead. My mum, who'd always had a weak heart, died from shock on the spot. They never found the killer, but a few years later I promised that I'd dedicate my life to bringing him to justice and fighting all criminals. As I got older, I prepared for my career by mastering scientific criminal investigation skills and training my body to physical and athletic perfection. Finally, at the age of about eighteen, I was ready for my new role; and, as if by answer, a winged creature flew through my open window: 'A bat! That's it!' I thought to myself, 'I shall become a bat.'

So begins the tale of Batman, one of the most frequently recounted 'origin stories' in comic-book mythology. It is a story which has been presented and re-presented——in both comic-books and films——from a variety of analytical angles: Bruce Wayne's need for revenge, his guilt for not saving his parents and his subsequent desire for reparation, his development of a 'classical hysterical neurosis.' And yet, one aspect of the Batman origin myth which has yet to transcend the dark alleys of Gotham City is that of the young Bruce Wayne's terror——or rather, his terrorlessness. Kneeling by the bodies of his dying parents, the young Wayne's only expression——as depicted in the original 1948 comic-strip——is one of anger: 'They're dead!' He says to Joe Chill, their murderer, 'You killed them... You killed my mother and father.' What is missing is any physical or psychological manifestations of fear: the pounding heart beat, the shaking body, the sweating, the desire to defecate and vomit, the panic, the confusion, the numbness, the desire to 'wake up' from the nightmare, the urge to run and run and run.

A few years ago, around two o'clock in the morning, I was walking back from a party through a fairly deserted part of East London when a tall, young man in a hooded top crossed the road and came walking towards me. I felt scared and moved away from him. He shouted over at me, 'D'you know what the time is?' I mumbled something back about not being very sure and kept on walking. A few minutes later I heard the sound of someone running up behind me, and turned round to see the hooded man. I shouted something moronic to him like, 'Did you find out what time it is, then?' But he didn't respond. Instead he came up to me, grabbed my jacket, and pulled out a knife with a shiny, pointed blade that must have been at least six inches long. 'Gimme some fuckin' money, then,' he said. The next few seconds are a blur: as terror flooded through my body something instinctive took over. My next moment of consciousness found me tearing down the street, screaming at the top of my voice, 'What the fuck d'you think you're doing you fucking cunt? Get the fucking fuck away from me.' I turned round to see him chasing behind me. The terror spurred me on. I shouted louder: 'You fuckin' cunt, you fuckin' cunt, just fuck off.' I turned around again to see that he was no longer in pursuit. I ran the next five hundred yards home, sat on my bed, and shook for the following hour.

If that's how I, as a 25-year old man, respond to having a knife pulled on me; imagine the terror that I——and many men, I suspect——would have experienced, standing in the young Bruce Wayne's shoes: the terror of facing a gun-wielding 'hoodlum'; the terror of seeing my parents——my pillars of security——destroyed; and, perhaps most significantly, the terror of discovering a senseless arbitrariness in existence. And yet, the young Wayne is depicted as expressing none of the terror that he must have, inevitably, experienced. Why? Because had he been drawn running down the street screaming, 'Get the fuckin' fuck away from me you fuckin' cunt,' he would never have achieved his status as a twentieth century icon of masculinity. 'Real men' don't show fear. 'Real men' aren't afraid because 'real men' are in control; and if you're in control, then there's nothing to be afraid of. And the moment you admit you're afraid, you're admitting that you're not in control. So, from the Kamikaze pilots of Japan to the teenage boys of the northern Kenyan Samburu tribe who must sit, unflinching, through their circumcision, men struggle to suppress their fear. Indeed, there is probably nothing men are more afraid of than fear itself.

But what happens to men's unexpressed fears? What happens to the experienced-but-not-expressed terror of the young Bruce Wayne? 'Put simply,' a pseudo-psychiatrist tells Bruce Wayne in the Batman graphic novel, Mask, 'you dissociate yourself from your other personalities.... You flee into this "Batman" identity in an attempt to control your world. The real world makes no sense to you since it killed your parents and screwed you into the ground. You see the world as meaningless chaos. You feel that you need to impose order. It's a fundamentally fascist impulse that many people share. When you put on the mask, a different personality takes over. Powerful. Dominant. Able to cope with things.' Hence, rather than expressing his terror, Bruce Wayne commits his life to eradicating it. He develops a persona——Batman——whose sole purpose is to re-establish a sense of terrorless control and order in the world: to re-establish a sense of masculine worth. Meanwhile, the terrifying senselessness that threatens to engulf his existence is projected onto his adversaries: most notably his arch-enemy the Joker, whose anarchic inanity comes closest to a veridical expression of Bruce Wayne's fundamental fears. So the terrorising chaos is not something that inhabits Bruce Wayne's being-in-the-world; it is something brought in from outside, something which is alien to him, something which he has the potential to overcome. And if he can only rid Gotham city of the Joker, return him to the insulated madness of Arkham Asylum, then his terrorised experience of existence will subside. And yet, the truth is, Bruce Wayne's terror long preceded the existence of the Joker, and it is likely to long out-last him. Because the true source of the terror is not in the Joker, but as part and parcel of Bruce Wayne's being. And the reason that Batman can never finally rid himself of the Joker is that he would then have to face the most terrifying of terrors——that he is a terrorised man.

As men, too, we often see our fears as something 'out there', rather than as something fundamental to our being-in-the-world. As a young child, I was terrified of monsters: spending night-after-night wide awake and rigid with fear, listening to the creaks on the staircase and visualising the beasts ascending it. Later on the monsters took a more insidious form: as the cancers and viruses which I feared were invading my body. Yet it was always something external that was 'making me' afraid, whilst I, with my Batman persona, vigorously battled to control and eradicate the terror——just as war soldiers battle to defeat the 'terrorising' enemy, and mountain climbers battle to conquer 'terrifying' mountain peaks. In other words, the terror was not something

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that was part of my experiencing of the world, but something in the world that I must overcome. I am not a terrified person. I am not afraid. And, if I do experience fear, it is because I am a man-in-control who is confronting a terrifying adversary.

As I grew older, I began to realise that the fears were not something 'out there', but something that was very much part of me. One night, the most terrifying of my life, I smoked too much, and suddenly became very aware of the speed of my heart beat. It was thumping away, and I became more and more frightened that it was going to go so fast it would bust. The more frightened I got the faster it went and the more frightened I got. I could feel the acidic juices pumping into my stomach, my face flushed, I wanted to run away, cry, scream, escape the whole thing. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to die, and the more terrified I got of dying, the more my body hammered away, and the more terrified I became that I was dying. Like some hellish roller coaster ride that picked up more and more momentum and which I couldn't stop, I visualised myself speeding down a tunnel. And at the end of the tunnel I saw a large ornate gate that had been forged open, and all the demons and monsters in the dungeon of my psyche had begun to escape. The gatekeeper, normally a most vigilant soul, had abandoned his post, and I was now left to confront my monsters alone. I pictured their grotesque, deformed faces, their sharp teeth and their glowering eyes, and I felt as if they were engulfing my body. I was being taken over by something 'within'.

After that evening, I began to explore the terror that lay locked away in my psyche. But the truth is, there are no monsters in my psyche. There is no terror outside of me, but there is also no terror inside of me. The terror is me, or rather, I am a person who frequently experiences fear or terror. And for me, as a man, it is still easier to say, 'There is a part of me, a "subpersonality", an "inner vulnerable child" who is afraid—-but I'm working on it,' than to simply say, 'I'm someone who gets scared a lot.' But the truth is, I am someone who gets scared a lot, who still gets shaky when the Underground train stops in the tunnel, who doesn't like walking home at night on his own, who still feels scared sometimes about sex. And I still feel scared to admit to my fearfulness because it makes me feel ashamed and unmanly and very un-Batman-like.

Batman is a being whose foundational experience, whose very reason for being, is terror. And yet, in his terror-lessness, he is a being who denies his very being. He is a mask, a shell which has eaten away its own

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flesh, an automaton which has destroyed the humanity which once inhabited it. And, if men deny their terror——not just their experience of being terrified, but a

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fundamental terror-ness towards the world——then they are in danger of eradicating a fundamental aspect of their humanity. Not just their fear, but the sensitivity and emotionality and aliveness that goes along with feeling afraid. Like Batman, they are in danger of becoming

masks, automatons who interact with the world in a rigid, stereotypical way. And, like Batman, they may be forced to dedicate their time and energy into externalising, and then attempting to eradicate, the terror that persistently threatens to 'invade' their world. A terror that constantly surrounds them, not because the world is filled with terrifying things, but because fear and terror are fundamental and fundamentally human modes of experiencing the world.

What's more, in denying their terror to themselves, men are likely to deny and hide their terror from others. So people may not see us as afraid and vulnerable, instead they may see us as people who are in control and confident, and who need to be tackled and undermined rather than supported and held. And if they don't see us as afraid, they're likely to mask their fears and insecurities too to maintain their own comparative sense of masculine worth, which can then make us feel like we have to put on a more convincing mask of I-know-what-I'm-doing to keep up with them, thus perpetuating the cycle. Indeed, the world would seem to be run by scared men who are scared to let other scared men see their fear. And they terrify each other with their threats and violence, and they respond to these threats with threats and violence back.

Fear, in reality, isn't that frightening. It's a natural response to a threatening situation, and the pounding heart beat, nausea, and hotness that accompany it are all nature's way of warning us that there's danger about. It's only when we, as men, start to pile up fear and shame on top of fear, and then fear and shame on top of that fear and shame, that it starts to either dehumanise us, or to spiral out of control. Sometimes, just before a radio interview or a lecture, I can feel my body hammering away with fear and a black hole opening up in my stomach. And when I wonder what would happen if I suddenly run out of words, or accidentally say the word 'cunt' on the radio, I feel like I want to run and run and run. But as I sit there, listening to my body and despising the physical uncomfortableness of my fearfulness, I'm also aware that I'm beginning to come to terms with it. And, ironically, the more I begin to accept my fearfulness, the less frightened I get, because the less I get caught in a cycle of fear——being afraid of being afraid. For me, and, I suspect, for many men, taking off a Batman mask of fearlessness is never going to be a fear-less process; and yet, as a man, I have a choice: do I detach myself from my human fearfulness and fear it; or do I re-embody my human fearfulness and, in doing so, re-embody my human being.

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