

New threads in Batman yarn

By STEVE DITLEA

O H, NO! NOT BATMAN, TOO!?

Amid rumors of an impending Caped Crusader catastrophe that will make Superman's recent well-publicized death look like a catnap, Dennis O'Neil, editor of Batman comic books, is the only man who can separate fictional fact from total fiction. And for fans, he has good news and . . . fashion news.

"Batman will not die. Batman will not retire. Robin will not take over Batman's job," O'Neil declares, dispelling the most common rumors.

What he confirms, however, will have fans buzzing: The Dark Knight Detective will get a new uniform later this year (in issue 500 of Batman comics) due to a "watershed event," which O'Neil, who came up with the plot line, will not disclose.

He will discuss the fact that this circulation-building stunt — in the same vein as Superman's death — will reach epic comic proportions, spilling over into 27 separate issues of Batman-

related titles published by DC Comics, including a new Catwoman comic — based on the character portrayed on screen by Michelle Pfeiffer.

"We're trying to do things with narrative that have never been done before, in any kind of fiction," says O'Neil, who also teaches comic-book writing at the School of Visual Arts. It's one of only three such academic course offerings in the U.S.

"I call what we're doing meta-fiction. We're dealing with a great big thing, the DC Comics universe of characters, and making it a cohesive, consistent whole. It means coordinating the efforts of dozens of writers and artists. Plotting and pacing rules don't exist yet. We have to improvise and still tell a rousing good yarn."

During much of his adult life, the mild-mannered O'Neil, 54, has seen his fate intertwined with Batman's. From 1969 to 1974, the former journalist from the Midwest made his mark as the principal writer for Batman comics, bringing social relevance and a dark edge to a character suffering from waning interest. After a stint with Marvel Comics, O'Neil returned to DC Comics to edit Batman, as well as to write occasional Batman stories.

Being Batman's editor has its real-world moments. On March 23, O'Neil and writer John Ostrander were guests at the governor's mansion in Virginia to witness the signing by Gov. L. Douglas Wilder of the state's first modern gun-control legislation.

A special edition of Batman comics, published last December, had been used by Wilder to prod legislators into voting for the measure, because even Batman comics knew that Virginia was a center of gun-trafficking.

That special edition, called "Seduction of the Gun" and detailing the mayhem caused by the proliferation of guns in the city, was prompted by the murder of a DC Comics executive's son in Greenwich Village.

"We don't do the cause of the month," O'Neil says. "But it's important to deal with social issues from time to time." Among the issues tackled recently by O'Neil's Batman: Drug addiction, child abuse and the perils of smoking. The heart attack suffered by Gotham City's Commissioner Gordon can be traced to O'Neil's own coronary problems, since reversed by diet and exercise.

Married to his childhood sweetheart and living happily in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill, O'Neil is enthusiastic about today's comics books. "People talk about the golden age of comics in the '30s and '40s," he says. "This is the platinum age, because there are more comics available and more variety than ever before."

(Ditlea is a frequent contributor.)



NICE KITTY! Batmeister Dennis O'Neil with Catwoman, for whom he has plans. The mannequin is wearing one of Michelle Pfeiffer's movie outfits.

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