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# BATGIRL AT 50: LOOKING BACK AT ORACLE THROUGH THE EYES OF HER CREATORS

Contributed by



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Spotlight

It started with a simple knock at the door on a lazy afternoon. Barbara Gordon, retired Batgirl, was spending time with her father, Gotham City Police Commissioner Jim Gordon, when they heard someone at the door. Thinking it was a neighbor, the former vigilante carried her tea with her as she answered, not bothering to check to see who it was.

A grave mistake, it turns out, because as the door swung open Babs only got a glimpse of the paper-white face and sickening red smile before the Joker, clad in a gaudy Hawaiian shirt and a wide-brimmed hat, pulled the trigger of his gun, sending a .45 caliber bullet through her spine.

"She won't be walking off the shelves in that state of repair," taunted the Joker, alluding to Barbara's former career as a librarian. "In fact, the idea of her walking anywhere seems increasingly remote."

As Barbara writhed on the floor of her apartment, bleeding and broken, watching the Joker's henchmen kidnap her father, she was no longer the strong, capable hero. She had become the victim.

The Joker's taunts would prove true. His shot did not kill her, but it did alter her life -- and, in some ways, the DC Universe -- forever. In those few pages of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, Barbara Gordon became something else.

### **She became Oracle.**

But it would take years -- and the work of a number of writers, artists and editors -- to transform her from the Joker's helpless victim to a new kind of hero.

It began in an unlikely place — in the pages of *Suicide Squad*.

### **Oracle is born**

"When [*The Killing Joke*] came out we had a real problem with how Barbara Gordon was treated," explains writer **John Ostrander**. "Maiming her seemed like a plot device ... we know from later in the story that she was also beaten and I think the story suggests was also raped. What a terrible way to treat a long time well-established character! What a terrible way to treat a FEMALE character."

At the time *The Killing Joke* was published in May of 1988, Ostrander and his late wife, Kim Yale, were already working on an ongoing series starring a group of the DC Universe's most deadly villains. *Suicide Squad* began in 1987, bringing together obscure characters from across the publisher's slate to take on dangerous, and usually illegal, missions for the U.S. government.

Later that same year, just a few months after DC put the character out to pasture, Ostrander and Yale would use *Suicide Squad* to introduce the world to Oracle.

"And we eased her in," recalls Ostrander. "Oracle originally was just a voice via computer along with messages on the screen. We wanted to create some mystery as to who she was which would create interest and then, at the right time, reveal that Barbara was Oracle. We felt that would give Barbara/Oracle the strongest debut we could."

Oracle would continue to appear in *Suicide Squad* throughout the rest of its five-year run, joining the team officially in 1990 with issue #48, and eventually even leading the team when Amanda Waller was incapacitated.

It would all come to an end, however, when *Suicide Squad* was canceled in 1992, and Barbara Gordon was left without a home ... temporarily.

"Part of her continuity was that she was knowledgeable about computers, so we decided to make her the information broker for the superheroes in the DCU," says Ostrander, recalling that he and Yale went to great pains to make her as useful as possible to the greater world of DC Comics. "We thought that if we created the character correctly, other writers in the DCU would find her useful. She could solve a lot of plot problems."

Their work paid off when, in 1992, writer **Denny O'Neil** decided to bring Barbara Gordon back to Gotham and back to Batman's inner circle. O'Neil reintroduced Oracle to Batman fans in the pages of the *Sword of Azrael* miniseries, establishing the hacker as the main source of information for the Caped Crusader and a key ally. The move would set the precedent for more Batman writers to utilize the character during the early '90s as a means of relaying information quickly to the masked vigilantes of Gotham City.

Oracle was still far from a high-profile hero until, in 1996, an editor at DC Comics had an idea ...

### **Flying with the Birds**

"They laid it out so well that it was just easy for me to take

the baton and run with it — or sit in the wheelchair and roll with it, as the case may be."

**Jordan B. Gorfinkel** was just getting his start at DC Comics when Ostrander and Yale brought Oracle and her wheelchair to comics, but he was a big fan of Barbara Gordon long before he would lend his editorial hand to the character.

"I had a mad crush on her when I was a kid," he relates. "I wanted so badly to be Robin in the sidecar of that motorcycle."

Gorfinkel had been working at DC Comics for a little while when he saw an opportunity for a brand-new series that would both fill a large gap in the publisher's demographic and allow a couple of underused characters to get their time in the spotlight. The idea: bring together Oracle's intelligence, information and tactical abilities and the impulsive, ass-kicking nature of the Black Canary. He just needed the right team.

"It was all a brainchild of Jordan Gorfinkel," recalls writer Chuck Dixon, who penned the first handful of *Birds of Prey* one-shots, as well as being the first to tackle the eventual ongoing series. "He told me the high concept and I didn't see it working. Black Canary had just had a solo book canceled due to miserable sales. Oracle was still associated with Suicide Squad in readers' minds. It took some convincing but he finally talked me into writing that first one shot. And he was right all along!"

"[Oracle's] issue was 'I need somebody to go out into the field and be my hands and legs.' Black Canary needed someone to be the brains and the emotional steadiness of the relationship," explains Gorfinkel. "And I felt that women, if they were really living in the world of superheroes, they would talk, they'd share their feelings, they'd draw strength from each other."

DC Comics wasn't willing to go all-in on the series right away, however. First, they wanted to prove that the stories were

there and that the audience would show up. Dixon and Gorfinkel got to work on a series of one-shots and mini-series starring their new team, testing the waters with artists and with the difficult-to-please comic book audience.

"It gave us the opportunity to try many different tones and try many different artists. And to not only prove how adaptable the series is and what kind of longevity it could have, but that it was popular," says Gorfinkel. "This is a series starring women. The superhero genre is dominated by men, both in terms of the characters and of course the comic book-buying audience, and that was particularly true in the '90s. So for DC to say we're going to invest the resources to build this carefully and then pay it off with an ongoing series was only to their credit."

### **Breaking hearts and faces**

In 1999 the *Birds of Prey* officially joined the of dozens of ongoing DC Comics properties on comic book store shelves, finally "breaking hearts and faces monthly," as the cover of issue #1 put it.

"The support of all you loyal readers of the *Birds of Prey* specials and your steady stream of letters and e-mail and pestering at conventions was heeded," wrote Dixon in the letter column at the back of that first issue. "So an ongoing book about two mature, independent, intelligent, resourceful women who actually manage to keep their clothes on is a reality. All because you demanded it."

"YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! Aaaaalllll riiiiight!" wrote Sarah Beach, an early *Birds of Prey* fan in that first letter column.

Subsequent letter columns showed a readership hungry for stories starring strong female characters.

"Oracle is fast becoming one of my favorite superheroes," wrote one fan. "The idea of a hero whose only power is her ingenuity is utterly refreshing."

Scott Stem, another fan, wrote to express both his enjoyment of the series and some specific concerns about how they might use Barbara Gordon in the future.

"Now, if we can just get people to remember that she was a U.S. Representative who had Dick Grayson for a congressional intern and that she dated a U.S. Senator," he wrote.

"The main guideline I set was that every story had to have an emotional arc," recalls Gorfinkel about the early days of the series. "It wasn't enough just to have a story arc where they're going through the paces in their adventure. There had to be some kind of emotional growth or there wasn't a reason for us to do it."

"It would NEVER be a cheesecake book. I didn't want that. Neither did Gorf," adds Dixon. "The female leads are badassess and that's the only way I wanted to portray them. The relationship between the two characters grew on its own. Their differences created all those fun character moments. They earned each other's respect over the course of their early adventures."

That relationship would grow and change dramatically over Dixon's four-year tenure on the series. It would take two years for the women to meet face-to-face, but even behind a computer screen (or maybe because of it), Oracle and Black Canary would develop a relationship built not only on trust and a shared sense of humor but on overcoming certain ideological differences.

"Barbara's view of the world was through a computer monitor. Though she had the most sophisticated database in the world, it was still limited compared to real-world experience," Dixon explains. "That led to complications as Dinah would often find out that the reality of events on the ground was not as Barbara had informed her."

Gorfinkel left the series in the first year, passing his editorial duties to **Joseph Illidge**, who would see the series through a number of major milestones, including the first meeting

between Barbara Gordon and the Joker since the villain robbed Babs of the use of her legs.

"I knew that we were going into the next stage of the series, which was Barbara having to confront the Joker in a really twisted *Silence of the Lambs* issue where she confronts him, but he doesn't see her face and she doesn't see his," Illidge recalled during the *Birds of Prey* 20th Anniversary panel at SDCC 2016. "It's really a battle of wits. It's really her closing a circle emotionally, facing the sum of all your fears and walking away from that with a position of emotional strength."

"There was a real need in the industry for what we were doing," says Gorfinkel. "And of course we started in one place and then Gail took it to a whole other level."

### **Moving up and moving out**

"I was a huge fan of *Birds of Prey* before I was ever asked to write it ... of all the books on the stand it was the one that felt like it was for me."

**Gail Simone** was still brand new to the world of comic book writing when she was offered the chance to helm the *Birds of Prey* series in 2003. She was attending San Diego Comic Con as part of Marvel's contingent, having gotten her start writing *Deadpool* for the publisher when a series of DC writers and editors approached her saying that DC was looking for a new writer for *Birds of Prey*.

"It almost feels like fate, somehow, because it's such a bizarre story," recalled Simone during the panel at SDCC. "I didn't think that you could do that. Marvel brought me to the convention, I was signing at the Marvel table, doing Marvel panels, and people are telling me to go over to talk to DC editorial at the DC booth. I thought that was a huge no-no, and I'd be a traitor and locked in the dungeon or whatever."

Eventually, DC's Chief Creative Officer, **Geoff Johns**, physically brought Simone over to the DC booth, and she became one of

the writers pitching to become the new ongoing writer for the popular series.

"They ended up not using anything that I pitched but saying "We want to hire you to write this book anyway"

"I really wanted a book where we could have three female characters and they were all friends and it was kind of like a buddy cop movie," explained Simone during the panel. "Really we didn't have any film that showed that. We certainly didn't have any comic books that had that. It just wasn't seen anywhere in media. So that was my goal."

Long before joining the DC editorial team, Simone was a vocal advocate of changing the way women were treated in comics. In 1999, she started the website **Women in Refrigerators**, which aimed to highlight the number of female characters who had been "killed, maimed, or depowered" in service of a male character's story, and to call for change among comics pros. Barbara Gordon's experience in *The Killing Joke* landed her on that list.

"I think *The Killing Joke* was a classic example of what I call a 'Women in Refrigerators' story," said Simone during the panel. "The problem for me is not that something terrible happened to a female character, it's that it's no longer her story. So the genius of her becoming Oracle and figuring out how to still fight crime and be who she is and just do everything from a chair, I think tells us everything that we need to know about the Barbara Gordon character."

Simone helmed the series for four years and saw the characters through some major changes. In 2004, the *War Games* crossover concluded with a bang as Oracle destroyed the clock tower that was her home and base of operations. It presented Simone with a challenge and a unique opportunity as the Birds went on the road for a while before settling in Metropolis.

But the biggest changes in Oracle's life would come much



later, when, in 2010, Simone would return to the series with a new team and a big story: *The Death of Oracle*.

The *Death of Oracle* wasn't a literal death but was a major turning point for the character. After more than two decades, her Oracle persona finally starts to threaten Barbara Gordon's life and the lives of her friends when The Calculator returns to seek his revenge on his old nemesis. In an effort to save her friends and stop her enemy, Barbara fakes a very public death and disconnects from the network. Only a handful of people were in on the secret, and for the first time since she became Oracle, her calls went unanswered.

### **Back on her feet**

The following year, after the hard reset of the DC Universe following *Flashpoint*, Oracle was no more. Instead, Barbara Gordon returned to her roots, donning the cape and cowl as Batgirl. The move received mixed reactions from fans, some excited to see Barbara Gordon back in the role that made her famous. Others, like one **blogger at Newsarama** at the time, thought the move was a mistake.

"She represented too much to have the void be ignored, even more so since this is happening when DC is claiming to increase the amount of diversity in its books. Unless Oracle is still present, it says that people with disabilities aren't cool enough."

The move proved to be a success, despite continued concerns about the loss of representation of a whole set of people with disabilities. In the six years since, Babs has not returned to the chair.

But while Babs continues to fight crime upright and flying high in the comics, Oracle's role as an information broker and powerful ally remains in other ways, particularly in the world of video games where Oracle remains a key component in sharing important information with Batman and his allies.

Oracle has appeared in each of the *Arkham* games published by Rocksteady and was a core component of the *DC Universe Online* MMORPG.

"Neither Barbara nor Oracle belonged to Kim and me," remarked Ostrander when asked what he thought of the decision to take Barbara out of the chair. "They're DC's property and they have a right to do what they want with her. Still, in my heart of hearts, I think it was a mistake. Many characters could (and have) become Batgirl but only Barbara can really be Oracle. Barbara as Oracle had an impact because she was Barbara with a long history before she became Oracle."

And therein is the key. **Whether she is in a wheelchair or soaring above the streets of Gotham, Barbara Gordon's time behind Oracle's screens have left an indelible mark on DC Comics and on the fans she inspired.**

"Barbara Gordon as Oracle meant a lot to a lot of people and still does," Simone explains, adding, "I still get e-mails about how it inspired somebody to do something different with their life or get out of a situation they needed to or whatever the case may be, and that is taking something really tragic and turning it into something amazing and powerful."

"She's a living example of the possible consequence of becoming a crimefighter, a first responder," says Dixon. "She's a wounded warrior and that aspect adds depth to the whole line as well as delineating the real stakes and real risks for the good guys."

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"That wheelchair did not define her. Who she was defined

her," Ostrander adds. "For me, personally, her *Year One* story was the last collaboration between my late wife, Kim Yale, and myself. In many ways, Oracle is Kim's legacy."