

# KEVIN NOWLAN

By Bob McLeod



**K**evin Nowlan is one of my favorite comic book artists, and he's been a fan favorite since he first got published. His style has also been very influential on many of the artists working in comics today. I've unfortunately never had the pleasure of meeting Kevin in person, but I discovered in this interview that he and I have a lot in common in how we regard our comic book art. This interview was conducted via e-mail. I've never interviewed anyone before, and I'm hoping I'll sound a bit more coherent this way. I asked Kevin to give me a brief bio so I could introduce him, and he did it so succinctly I'll let him tell it:

**KEVIN NOWLAN:** Born in Nebraska, 1958. Youngest of six. Started drawing comics in 1982. My first professional job was penciling a *Dr. Strange* fill-in for Al Milgrom.

The Jack B. Quick stories that I did with Alan Moore are the highlight of my career so far. They're funny, very original and I was allowed to pencil, ink, letter and sometimes color them myself.

*[Now how many of you would have guessed that? -Bob]*

Other highlights would be the Man-Bat *Secret Origin* story and the *Outsiders Annual*.

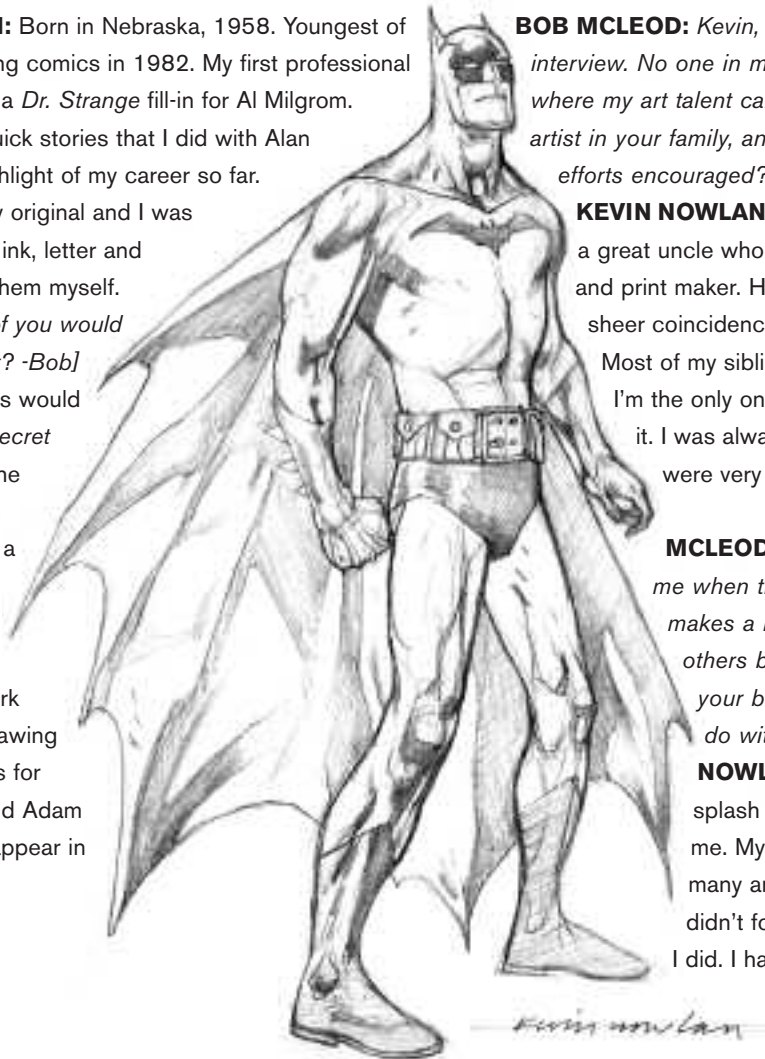
I'm working on a couple of covers right now and I'm drawing a short Goon story for Dark Horse. I'm also drawing short origin stories for Elongated Man and Adam Strange that will appear in DC's 52 series.

**BOB MCLEOD:** Kevin, thank you so much for this interview. No one in my family seems to know where my art talent came from. Are you the first artist in your family, and were your early artistic efforts encouraged?

**KEVIN NOWLAN:** No, I'm not the first. I had a great uncle who was a landscape painter and print maker. He was very talented and by sheer coincidence, I was named after him. Most of my siblings drew and painted but I'm the only one who made a career out of it. I was always encouraged. My parents were very supportive.

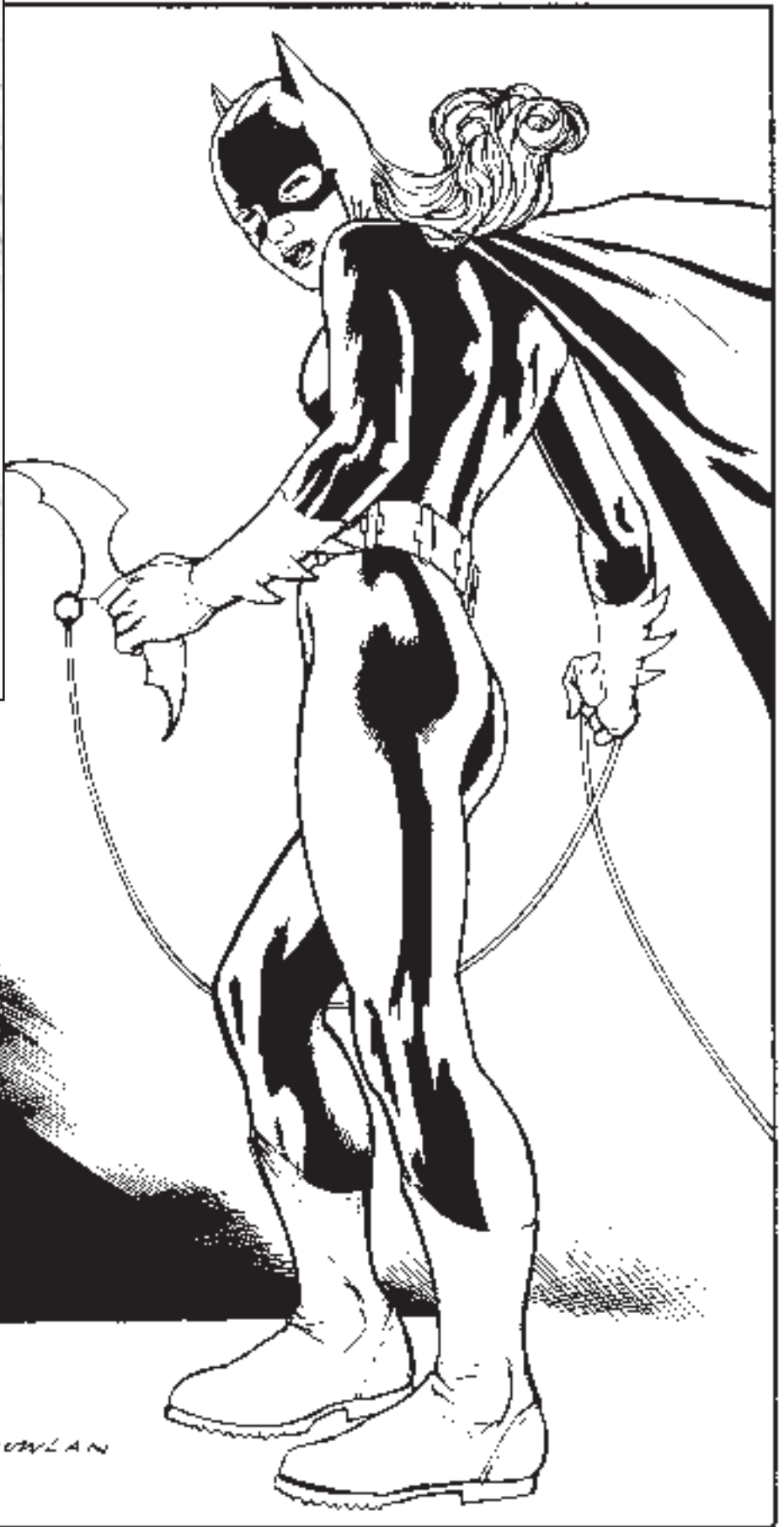
**MCLEOD:** It's always fascinating to me when the last kid in a family makes a bigger splash than all the others before him. Do you think your birth order had anything to do with your art?

**NOWLAN:** I didn't make a bigger splash than all the others before me. My brother is very talented in many areas, including art. He just didn't focus on one specific skill like I did. I have very talented siblings.



**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

I don't remember if I ever inked this or not but I think it needs more shadows on the figure to give it some additional drama. That's one of the nice things about drawing Batman; it's hard to overwork the shadows. As Wally Wood said, "When in doubt, black it out."



**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

**Batgirl pin-up pencils:** I was trying to put a little more depth into this figure by twisting the pose and lowering the point of view. I left a few details for the inking stage but most of the information is there.

**Batgirl pin-up inks:** The double-lit shadows are easier than they look, even if you're drawing something without photo reference like I did here. You just need to deal with one light source at a time and keep them far enough apart so that you get some interesting black shadows in the middle of the object. They're handy when you want to define the edge of a dark object against a dark background.

BATMAN AND BATGIRL TM &  
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**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

I really enjoy doing pieces like this. It's the kind of drawing you never get to do in a story or even on a cover. A few years ago I started to figure out how to draw Batman's cape so that it has that leathery batwing look. This wide layout gave me plenty of room to play around with it. Not much difference between the pencils and the inks here. I think I like the contrast between the heavily rendered Batman and the lighter approach on Batgirl and Robin. I believe most of the inks are pen but there's a little brushwork on the right side of the cape.

Watching my brother draw race cars and monsters when I was a little kid probably inspired me quite a bit.

**MCLEOD:** *What formal art training have you had, if any?*

**NOWLAN:** I went to a trade school that taught design and a minimal amount of illustration. They told us we were wasting our time trying to draw and that none of us would get paid for doing drawings. I wish I'd had a chance to attend the Joe Kubert school or apprentice with an established comic artist. I had to pick everything up so haphazardly and I still feel there are things I haven't learned to do correctly.

**MCLEOD:** *Do you think formal training is important for comic art? If you had it to do over, would you get a degree in art somewhere, or go to the Kubert School? I had a little formal training, but I'm also mostly self-taught. I really wish I had taken some painting classes along the way.*

**NOWLAN:** Yes. I wish someone had pushed me in that direction. I really could have used some formal education.

**MCLEOD:** *What drew you to doing comic art, as opposed to, say, commercial art or fine art or animation? I knew from the age of five that I wanted to be a cartoonist of some sort, but everyone*

*tells me that's uncommon. When did you decide on comics as a profession?*

**NOWLAN:** I'd always wanted to draw comic books, or comic strips or animation or anything that could be considered "cartooning." After I graduated from the trade school I worked in a printing shop for about four years doing paste-up and logo designs. I rarely got to do any illustrations, so it was starting to look like those instructors were right. Out of frustration I began working on comic book samples that I hoped would land me a job at Marvel and DC. The more tedious



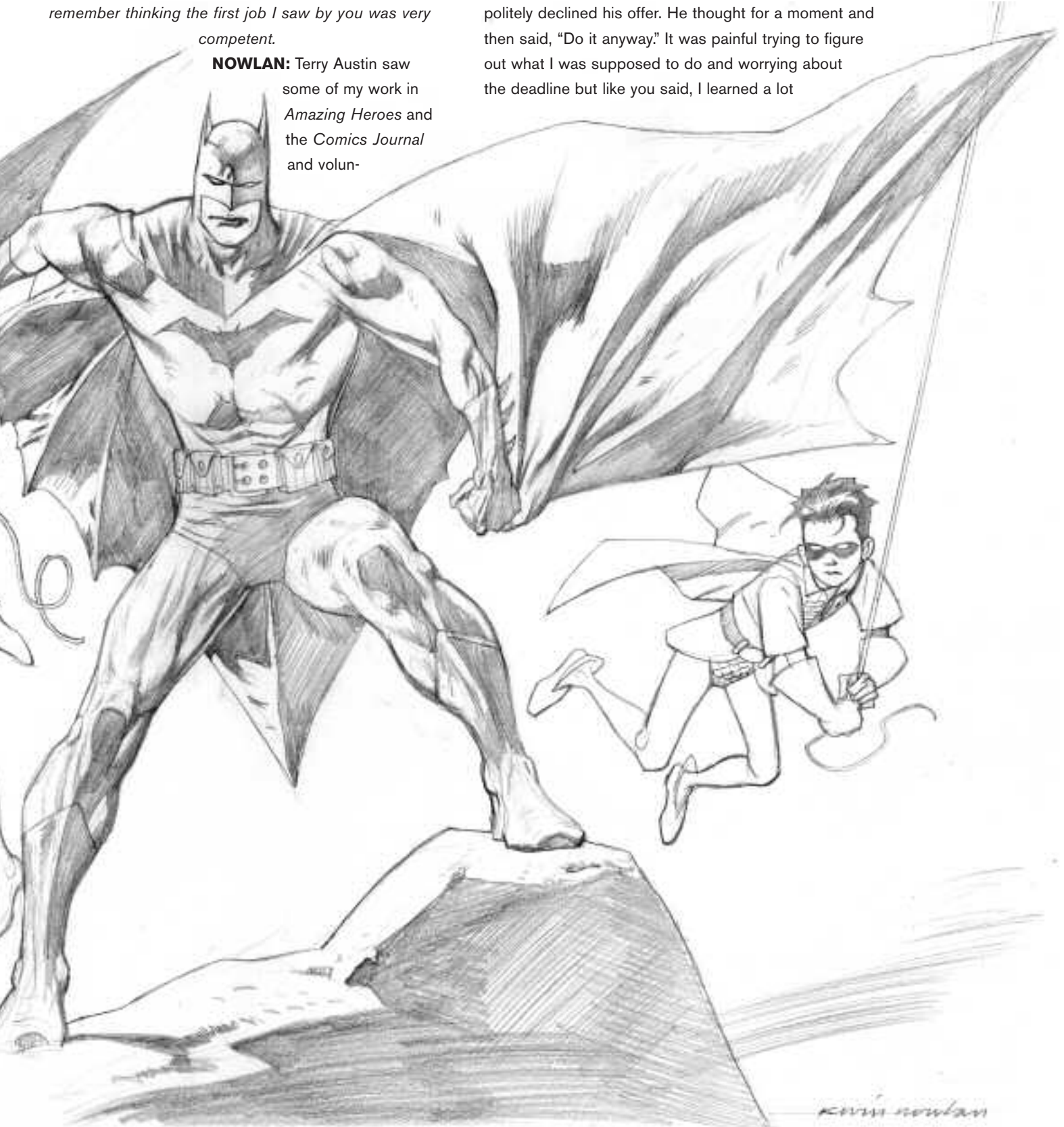
the printing shop job got, the harder I worked on my comic samples. Eventually it paid off.

**MCLEOD:** *How did you get started professionally in comics? Did you feel you were ready when your big break came, or was it more difficult than you thought it would be? I did a lot of learning on the job, but I remember thinking the first job I saw by you was very competent.*

**NOWLAN:** Terry Austin saw some of my work in *Amazing Heroes* and the *Comics Journal* and volun-

teered to show my samples to some editors. I got the call from Al Milgrom shortly after that. I definitely wasn't ready. I hadn't even drawn any stories yet and suddenly I was being asked to pencil a full issue of a monthly title and it was due in 30 days. Al told me to think about it overnight and when he called back the next day I explained to him that I didn't think I was ready and I politely declined his offer. He thought for a moment and then said, "Do it anyway." It was painful trying to figure out what I was supposed to do and worrying about the deadline but like you said, I learned a lot

BATMAN, ROBIN &  
BATGIRL TM &  
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Kevin Nowlan

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**KEVIN NOWLAN: Batgirl/Joker cover thumbnail:**

It may be rough but this small cover sketch has almost all the elements worked out. I even roughed in an idea for a logo design which DC bought and used on all four of the "DC First" titles. The details of the buildings aren't very clear but the basic shapes are there.

BATGIRL AND JOKER TM & ©2006 DC COMICS

**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

**Batgirl/Joker cover**

**pencils:** I made the figures a little bigger and moved them up a bit. Batgirl's knees are in the frame now which seems to work better compositionally. I spent a fair amount of time trying to get the pleats, wrinkles and shadows on the Joker's clothing to look right but after that everything fell into place fairly easily. I was surprised how fast the buildings came together. The pitted edge of the wall in the foreground shows one of my favorite Wally Wood tricks for suggesting weathered stone.





**KEVIN NOWLAN:**  
**Batgirl/Joker cover**  
**inks:** When I started on the inks I tried very hard to maintain the textures and gray values that I saw in the pencils. The shadow on the wall between them was originally going to be solid black but I liked the pencil crosshatching so I went with that.

**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

I was consciously trying to give Superman and Green Lantern distinct features and physiques. Gil Kane basing Green Lantern on his then-neighbor Paul Newman stuck in my mind, so I pictured him being a little shorter and with sharper features than Superman. The pencils are a bit loose in places but everything critical is worked out with more clarity.

SUPERMAN AND  
GREEN LANTERN  
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*Kevin Nowlan*

just out of necessity. I'm flattered that you thought my work was competent. I quickly learned how many things I didn't know how to draw.

**MCLEOD:** *Can you expand a bit on how exactly you went about improving your art after you landed that first job at Marvel? Anything you can recommend for struggling young artists? For instance, when I was starting out and struggling to make my figures more dynamic, I got a Buscema Conan comic and copied every Conan figure in it about 1½" tall (no matter how big they were in the comic), just to get a feel for how he twisted the torso and posed the arms and legs.*

**NOWLAN:** Drawing that first story made me aware of how little I knew. The first big obstacle was the buildings. I started out drawing those shoe box skyscrapers and started to look around me at lived-

in buildings that had personality and character. I took photos and clipped pictures out of magazines and studied artists like Kaluta and Moebius. That exercise with the Buscema Conan's is a good suggestion. I guess the idea is to seek out someone who's good at the skill you want to develop and study their work. At that point I was studying everyone because I had so much to learn.

**MCLEOD:** *Who were your main influences? I see a lot of Frazetta in there. Were you obsessed by him or anyone else at some point in the beginning, or did you just study everyone you came across?*

**NOWLAN:** Frazetta is there in the inking, especially the pen and ink crosshatching, but I think I was getting that from Wrightson before I had a chance to see Frazetta's pen and ink work. At the time, I knew him as a paperback cover painter. I don't think I was ever obsessed with him like I was with Bob Oksner and Neal Adams. It's difficult to come up with a good list of influences because it would include almost everyone.

**MCLEOD:** *Bob Oksner. There's a name you don't hear much anymore. I love his art. It's a shame he's not better known*

**KEVIN NOWLAN:** *This is the kind of preliminary sketch that makes a drawing come together very smoothly. Everything is here: Perspective, composition, lighting... it just needs a little refining. Unfortunately, I seldom finish layouts to this degree so I end up fighting them when I try to work out the final pencils.*

BATMAN AND CATWOMAN TM & ©2006 DC COMICS



**KEVIN NOWLAN:** *This is just a very quick, simple layout to establish the basic composition for the cover painting for Legends of the DCU #39. Lots of little details changed but getting the large shapes worked out at this stage is very important.*

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**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

Prelim for the cover of *Adventures of Superman* #609. I was trying for a more exaggerated, almost cartoony look on this one. I think the best Superman art has a nice balance between realism and exaggeration and I kept trying to find out where that line was.

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today. Very charming figure drawing. Anything in particular you admire about Oksner, or tried to emulate?

**NOWLAN:** Many things. His inking has a nice organic feel to it. He combines cartooning with realism beautifully. I like the way his poses suggest personality. People are rarely standing still doing nothing. His drawings suggest someone who really enjoys drawing.

**MCLEOD:** Very well put. I totally agree. Speaking of enjoying drawing, do you keep a sketchbook?

**NOWLAN:** No.

**MCLEOD:** Do you still draw for fun, or do you just want to do anything but draw in your free time?

**NOWLAN:** I rarely draw just for fun but I can still thoroughly enjoy drawing if things come together well.



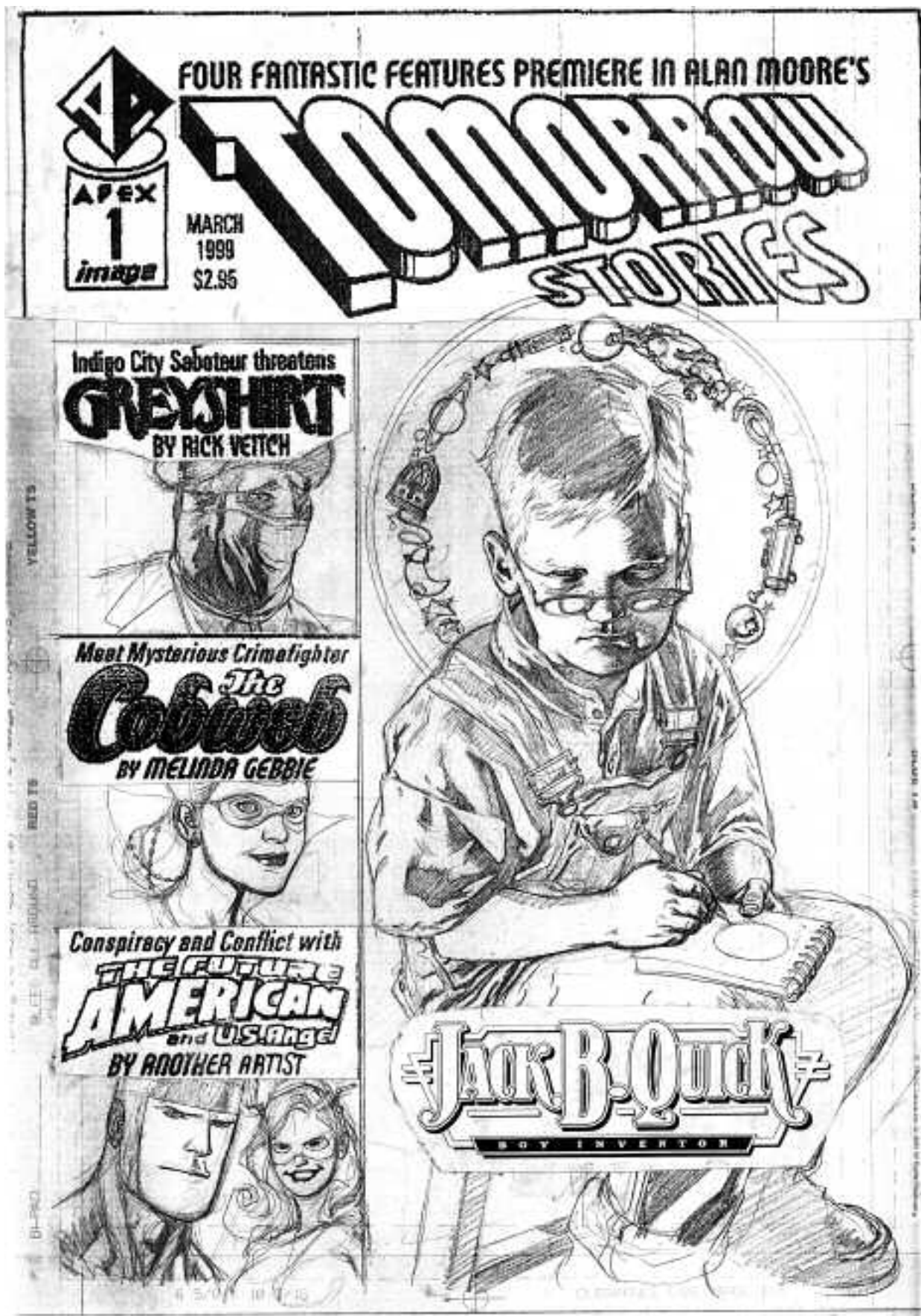
**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

**Adventures of  
Superman**

**#609 inks:**

The shadows on Superman's face make me think I might have been inspired by some of Bernie Wrightson's work. I didn't have a good brush handy so I inked it with a pen.

**KEVIN NOWLAN:**  
**Tomorrow Stories**  
 #1 cover rough:  
 After I finished the pencils for the cover I made a reduced copy and crudely pasted logos on to see how everything would fit together. The drawing of Jack was made much easier by referencing a couple of snapshots of my son, Spencer. The mildly malevolent expression came from him and never would have occurred to me at that point.



**MCLEOD:** I only ask because it's something I often get asked. I always hate this question, because if I say no, it sounds like I don't like to draw, which isn't true. But after drawing all day, I need to get away from my drawing table and do something else. I've never understood how artists find time to do sketchbooks.

**NOWLAN:** I feel the same way. I know it'd be good for me but I can't justify it.

**MCLEOD:** When you draw, do you imagine a finished drawing in your mind and then just put it down on paper, or do your drawings evolve after you begin moving the pencil?

**NOWLAN:** They almost never appear fully formed in my head before I start drawing. Sometimes I have a rough idea but for the most part they evolve through a series of sketches.

**MCLEOD:** Me, too. What's your drawing process? Do you use a lightbox to get a clean drawing, or do you develop the pencils right on the page? Do you do thumbnail layouts?

**NOWLAN:** I like to do thumbnails first. If I can work out a strong composition at that stage, everything else seems to fall into place very easily. Then I'll lightbox or Artograph it up to an intermediate size, work out the details a little more and then go up the final size.

**MCLEOD:** Artograph? Get out! And I thought I was "old school"! I have an old Artograph in the closet I bought back when I worked up at Neal's studio, since Neal used one. I figured whatever Neal did must be the best way to do things! I used it a while, but it always seemed like more trouble than it was worth. The room has to be really dark to see the image well. (If anyone wants to buy it, I'll give them a good price...!) I eventually bought a xerox copier and enlarged drawings with that for years, and now I scan them and enlarge them on the computer. But you still like to use the Artograph?

**NOWLAN:** A little. As you said, it's easier to trace over an enlarged copy of a sketch so the Artograph isn't used much these days. It still comes in handy in a pinch.

**MCLEOD:** Do you consider your usual finished pencils to be tight or loose? How much thinking do you save for the inks?

**NOWLAN:** I think they're fairly tight. You couldn't shoot from them but another inker could figure them out without too much trouble. I don't save much for the inks. Textures maybe, but not details.



**KEVIN NOWLAN:** *Tomorrow Stories #2*, pg. 2 Pencils: As you can see, I've lettered and inked most of the lettering even before the pencils are finished. It's not as backwards as it seems. There's so little space available that working this way lets me know exactly how much room is left for the drawings. Officer Pete was completely redrawn before I started the inks. I penciled small details like the wrinkles in Jack's overalls very carefully so that I wouldn't have to whiteout corrections when I inked them.



**KEVIN NOWLAN:** *Batman Black and White #4*, "Monsters in the Closet", pg. 3, layout: I made copies of the rough pencil layout and added some big shadows with a sharpie. It made me a little more brave with the black-spotting and helped me visualize the final page before I started in with the finished pencils. All the movement here is left-to-right. It probably didn't have to be but I think it helps keep things clear to the reader. BATMAN TM & ©2006 DC COMICS

**KEVIN NOWLAN:**

**Hawkman #33**

**pencils:** I worked out the composition and almost all the rendering on the three figures before I gave much thought to the background. I knew the horizon would be tilted and we'd be looking up at the buildings but not much more.

HAWKMAN AND  
HAWKGIRL TM &  
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**KEVIN NOWLAN:  
Hawkman #33 inks:**

I fixed one of Hawkgirl's wings and moved Hawkman's right foot down, then started to work out the background. That big gap on the right side of the cover seemed like a good spot for a fire hydrant. I think it was covered with text when the cover was printed. I was horrified to see that someone substituted a low-resolution file for my 600 dpi color seps so it looked really bad when the book was printed but there was nothing anyone could do about it. These things happen.

**MCLEOD:** *Have you ever penciled for another inker, and if so, how did you like it? I don't recall seeing anyone else ink your pencils. I know personally, having done so much inking, the finish is very important to me and I'm never very satisfied with anyone else inking my pencils, no matter how much I like their inking on other pencilers. Do you feel that way?*

**NOWLAN:** Definitely. My first two jobs at Marvel were inked by Terry Austin and Carl Potts. They did a great job but I didn't know what to give them. At the time, I was more focused on the finish or a piece and wasn't paying much attention to structure so it was probably difficult for someone else to interpret my lines.

**MCLEOD:** *Yeah, I remember seeing those jobs now. Terry and Carl both draw well, so I'm sure they could handle it. I don't mean this particularly as a good thing or a bad thing, but you're considered a fairly dominating inker. Do you think of yourself that way? Can you explain how you feel about inking other pencilers, with respect to blending your style and theirs?*

**NOWLAN:** That's an understatement. It started when I didn't know how to ink a penciler I was working with and couldn't make sense of his shadow patterns. I tried to rework them but the more I drew the less it looked like his work. Certain editors seemed to like the results and before long they were expecting me to put my own mark on everything I inked. I've even had people complain about me being too faithful to the penciler. I haven't resolved any of this but I'm doing less inking now so the problem doesn't crop up much these days.

**MCLEOD:** *That happened with me as well. I've gotten a few very tight pencilers who didn't understand why I didn't put in more of my style, apparently unaware they didn't leave me any room to do it! What is your main priority and intent in inking? When I ink, my main concerns are form and light. The rendering style is irrelevant to me as long as the image has weight and looks three-dimensional. You use a lot of split lighting and blacks, as I do. But many current artists focus much more on often superfluous linework (at least in my opinion) and let the colorist worry about form. Can you tell us your thoughts on this?*

**NOWLAN:** I think we developed an approach that relies less on color. That's why spotting blacks seemed to be such an important skill for our generation of inkers. I think we're getting to the point where the colorist has much more to say about the finished look of a piece than the inker does.

When I'm inking, my main intent is to produce an effective piece of art. If the pencils look good to me,

I'll try to preserve as much of them as possible. If they're lacking—and this applies even if I'm the guy who did the penciling—I'll look for ways to dress them up with ink. Shadow effects, textures... anything I can think of. I just want the final results to be as strong as possible.

**MCLEOD:** *What's your opinion on the direction the business has gone in recent years, with many pencilers doing very tight pencils that don't leave much room for creative input from the inker?*

**NOWLAN:** If it works for them that's fine. It can get boring working over tight pencils because you really do feel like a "tracer". But I've also worked over layouts that had a dearth of information and I felt like the penciler was taking money out of my pocket. Gil Kane and Mike Mignola were fun to ink because they gave me everything I needed but left room for me to contribute a little.

**MCLEOD:** *That is exactly how I feel. I love inking loose pencils, but I think I should get paid for finishing the penciler's drawing if they're too loose. You mentioned earlier that the "Jack B. Quick" jobs are the highlight of your career. I really enjoy your "Jack B. Quick" work. That type of comics is much more to my taste than dark super-heroes. It's just so much fun. Do you have a preferred genre of comic art?*

**NOWLAN:** I like variety and JBO gave me a chance to draw things that I'd never been able to include in a comics story before. Old people, old cars, old houses. I don't mind superheroes though. I'd like to think that I'm fairly adaptable.

**MCLEOD:** *Any genre you'd like to do but haven't gotten to yet?*

**NOWLAN:** Yeah, there's still a few I haven't had a chance to try. I'd like to do a retro Sci-fi story and maybe some teen humor. I love the old Archie comics by Harry Lucey and Dan DeCarlo. I've been trying to collect some of Bob Oksner's Binky comics as well. I think something like that would be fun to draw. Not much call for it these days.

**MCLEOD:** *Do you ever get the urge to do some landscape painting like your great uncle? I never cared about painting at all until I hit 50 and suddenly it's what I want to do most.*

**NOWLAN:** The urge hasn't struck me yet. I think I still prefer pen-and-ink or pencil. Paint intimidates me.

**MCLEOD:** *Well, Kevin, I hope you've enjoyed this as much as I have. I hope we can meet in person sometime. Take care and thanks again. ★*



Kevin Nowlan  
Modern Masters Vol. 4: Kevin Nowlan  
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