

*The Dark Knight* director Christopher Nolan with brother and co-writer Jonathan Nolan (right)



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## Good Examples: Jonathan Nolan on *The Dark Knight*

Last summer *The Dark Knight* raised the bar for summer blockbusters by demonstrating that a tentpole film could not only create a box-office bonanza, but also contain fine and nuanced storytelling.

Along with wonderfully realized technical and artistic elements, terrifically exciting set-pieces, and bravura performances from stars Christian Bale, Aaron Eckhart, and especially Heath Ledger as The Joker, the intelligence and seriousness of purpose with which the film's creators developed the script are some of the main reasons why *The Dark Knight* captured the imaginations of audiences worldwide. *Script* recently spoke with co-screenwriter Jonathan Nolan about how the screenplay for this landmark film was crafted.

Despite the way *Batman Begins* ended, the filmmakers had no definite plans to follow up their 2005 smash. "Chris didn't intend to make a sequel," Jonathan recalls. "He always felt you give everything you can to the film you're working on. Don't bank on the idea of doing another film." The appearance of a joker card in the movie's denouement was meant only to link it to the larger Batman universe. But when *Batman Begins* proved to be a success and the studio requested a follow-up, the creative team decided to use that card—as well as an accompanying line indicating that Batman's actions were provoking an escalation on the part of Gotham City's criminals—as a jumping-off point. The new film would focus on the course and cost of that escalation with a radical new screen interpretation of Batman's eternal nemesis, The Joker, serving as its prime catalyst.

As the writing process got underway, Christopher Nolan and *Batman Begins* co-screenwriter David S. Goyer plotted out a dark story in which Batman struggles to deal with a city in turmoil that is rapidly spinning out of control. In the course of the adventure, the costumed superhero is pushed to his physical, emotional and ethical limits, suffers two terrible losses, and in the end is forced to go on the run as a scapegoat for all of the chaos

his crusade has set in motion. Nolan and Goyer outlined the story by using notecards on corkboards, a technique that allowed them to visualize the plot as it developed. Their original intention was to use three boards—one for each act—but the story of *The Dark Knight* was so big and ambitious that they ultimately ended up using five boards.

With Goyer scheduled to direct his own feature and Nolan about to begin production on *The Prestige*, neither had the time to turn the outline into a first-draft screenplay, so Christopher asked his brother Jonathan, upon whose short story *Memento* was based and who had just finished collaborating with Christopher on the script for *The Prestige*, to take on the task. The younger Nolan, a comic-book fan who had consulted on *Batman Begins* and who was first introduced to Batman when Christopher bought him a copy of Frank Miller's classic graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight*

*Returns*, found the assignment to be a relative breeze, primarily due to the fact that his brother and Goyer "had a great story mapped out. After I stopped kind of fighting the outline, saying, 'What if we do this, what if we do that?' and realized that I should just get in there and do justice to the story they came up with, [it became] one of the easiest first drafts I ever had to write. It just came flowing right out of the outline that they had put together."

Jonathan prepared for the assignment by reading the hundreds of issues of Batman comics sent to him by Paul Levitz, the president of DC Comics. "When it comes to these movies, the research is the comic books. You have 70 years of incredible talent working on these characters, and so when you get to write them you really get a chance to dive in and play with all these different ideas and different visions and versions of, in The Joker's case, this kind of iconic character," he says.



The cast and crew work on a stunt for *The Dark Knight*

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Heath Ledger as The Joker

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### The Trickster & The White Knight

Jonathan was very happy to have the chance to take on that iconic character. “I feel that The Joker is one of those elemental characters that you kind of intuitively understand. There seems to be a [cultural] identity to him that transcends the comic books. He plugs

into cultural figures like Loki or the trickster god. That seems to be the kind of tradition he stems from, which is one of the reasons I think the character is so durable.”

*The Dark Knight* presents a radically different screen interpretation of the Joker character, who in previous films and television

shows was depicted primarily as a humorous crime boss. In *The Dark Knight*, the character is portrayed as a viciously manipulative, psychopathic anarchist whose only goal is to set Gotham City on fire and watch it burn. How did the writers come up with this version of the character? Jonathan cites Bob Kane’s original Joker stories, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and a story by legendary comic-book writer Denny O’Neil called “The Joker’s Five-Way Revenge” as being strong influences on their vision. These stories’ “darker vision of the character was the one we were trying to articulate. A comic-book line called *Gotham Central* by Greg Rucka and Ed Brubaker was hugely influential on our take as well. Their Joker had a lot of the sadistic elements that are featured in the film.”

Jonathan says he knew they were on the right track with the character when, halfway through the writing process, he came across the original introduction of The Joker in the first issue of Batman comics and saw that it had virtually the same beats and set-ups and ideas that they had in the script. “It was so close and that was incredibly gratifying because it felt like we had worked our way backward to the essence of the character. That was hugely confidence-building.”

One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Dark Knight’s* Joker is the fact that, unlike most villains in comic-book movies, no origin story is provided for the character. This was a concept that Christopher Nolan and David Goyer had incorporated into their original outline and one that Jonathan Nolan enthusiastically adopted. “Hanging any kind of backstory on such an iconic, timeless character is slightly disappointing. It identifies him too much, it demystifies him too much.” Jonathan much prefers the implication provided by the film’s first shot of The Joker: “Heath Ledger—you don’t know it’s Heath—has his back to you. He’s standing on a street corner, holding a mask backward, the camera is dolly-ing in toward him. To me that’s such an iconic kind of shot, and really captures the idea that he just kind of appears. There’s nothing explicitly supernatural about it, I’m just much more satisfied with an idea of the character where you think he just springs up from nothing, almost as if he’s been sort of conjured up by the existence of Batman

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himself—as a specific kind of demon to sort of torment him.”

Taking their cue from a line in Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The Killing Joke* in which The Joker says, “If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice,” the Nolans decided to have the villain toy with the other characters as well as the audience by offering a number of different origin stories for himself (including one in which he attributes his scarred visage to the violent acts of an abusive father and another in which he claims to have disfigured himself), a gesture that perfectly reveals his Machiavellian, and ultimately unknowable, nature. The Nolans spent a lot of time coming up with just the right tales and determining the specific order they should come in. “That was,” Jonathan reports, “an aspect of the screenplay that I was incredibly satisfied with.”

Besides Batman and The Joker, the film’s other main character is Gotham City’s District Attorney Harvey Dent who in the course of the story is attacked by The Joker and transformed into the psychotic villain Two-Face. From Jonathan Nolan’s perspective, Dent is actually the film’s protagonist. “It’s Harvey’s movie. Harvey’s trajectory in the comics always seemed like it had a shape—a tragic shape, a real arc. So that arc became the story of the film, the tragedy of Harvey Dent. Harvey is a classic hero. He’s the real thing, willing to put himself out there without a mask on and stick up for what is right. It’s his heroism that is targeted not just by the city’s criminals, but also by The Joker. Harvey is a decent person—the best of them—and he becomes a monster.”

Given the ongoing nature of the villains in the Batman comic books, many fans were dismayed by the fact that Two-Face died at the end of the film, but Jonathan felt it was right for the character. “Harvey was the kind of character that would rather go out with a bang. There’s something sad about the idea of him rotting away in Arkham Asylum, breaking out, robbing the Second National Bank at 2:22 p.m. ...”

### Jumping the Rail

As Jonathan worked on his draft, he tried to leave himself available for inspiration and surprise. “I don’t know about other writers, but for myself, I’ll write a scene and halfway

through I will figure out what the scene is doing. Half the time, the only way I know if something’s working is when it deviates from what I thought it would be ... when it surprises me. You get into a scene and you think you know where it’s going to go, and then, all of a sudden, everything jumps the rails and goes into a different direction and you realize, ‘No, that’s what the scene wanted to be,’ you just hadn’t figured it out until you got into it. It sounds like a slightly unformed technique, but I think to really surprise the audience ... you have to be open to the idea that the scene will reinvent itself as you write.”

Once Jonathan finished his draft of the screenplay, Christopher took over and did several passes himself. When Christopher reached a place where he felt satisfied with the material, he brought Jonathan back into the process. The two brothers worked on the next several drafts together—batting ideas back and forth and taking turns writing out scenes and sequences. Christopher then wrote

the final draft of the script himself: “Chris always has the last pass on a script,” Jonathan notes. “He’s always going to take it and make it his own, which I think is about directing as much as it is about screenwriting.” However, Jonathan remained on the set throughout production in order to be available for consultation with his brother.

As we all know, *The Dark Knight* went on to become a terrific success, earning laudatory reviews, eight Academy Award® nominations, and selling enough tickets to make it the second-highest grossing film of all time. When asked how it feels to have his work so well-received, Jonathan replies, “It’s enormously exciting to see an audience embrace a film. There’s a satisfaction in having critics embrace a film. And then, every once in a blue moon, you get to do a film where it engages all of those folks. To have this kind of resounding enthusiasm for what we did—it’s an incredible experience to go through. This is why you do it.”



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