

Crime Busters

The movie Dick Tracy is a fastidious recreation of the cartoon world of the 30s. Batman, though, was 80s bleakness. Rodney Cavalier looks behind the recent vogue in comics-turned-movies.

"The 'Bat-Man', a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoer, in his line battle against the evil forces of society...his identity remains un known." - Episode one of Batman, Detective Comics, May 1939.

"What was taking place then was the last stage, you might say, of big-time gangsterism in Chicago...It suddenly dawned on me that perhaps we ought to have a detective in this country who would hunt these fellows up and shoot 'em down." - Chester Gould, the creator of Dick Tracy.

The use of special effects in the movie productions of Batman and Dick Tracy has enabled the Golden Age of comics to be captured on film, magic unimpaired. The brilliance of that technical achievement comes some two decades after the publishers of comics, then a medium in decline, discovered the simplification of good and evil had lost its market.

When it comes to depicting mayhem, the two media have moved in opposite directions: the adventure comics have adapted the realism of the modern cinema while the cinema has brought to the screen the black-and-white values of the comics of the 30s and 40s. For both it is a lucrative market.

The movie *Batman* is the comics original, a Caped Crusader unblemished by moral doubt. Just like his progenitors, the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro, Batman is a rich idler until he dons his secret identity to serve humanity. The movie of 1989, like the comics world of 1939, is a time of absolutes.

Wallowing in Batman at the cinema was like chancing upon a long-forgotten cache of comic books from the Golden Age. Hollywood well knows the value of familiarity, of plots tried and true, the sighs of an audience at the arrival of the retribution that was never in doubt. Westerns were where it created its own mythology, the genre where nothing extraordinary should ever happen. The tale in the eight hours mini-series, *Lonesome Dove* was one of beguiling familiarity. Spinning the myth becomes a satisfaction in itself, a matter of the writers assiduously reworking all the symbols, a matter of the aging audience ticking off the themes from 300 Saturday afternoons at "the pictures".

The western classic is a man or men against the odds, fortified only by a sense of justice and a Colt .45, pursuing outlaws, driving cattle. Lonesomeness is its own fulfilment when a man knows he has right on his side. The comics' own distinctive creation, the super hero, is equally certain that right is on his side. That is why he (or she) can be an avenger greater than the law itself. Unrestricted by bureaucracy or the petty concerns of making a living, he perceives the wider good of all men, distracted by the love of just one special woman. These productions succeed across the generations because they evoke this in one age group and spin the myth anew with others.

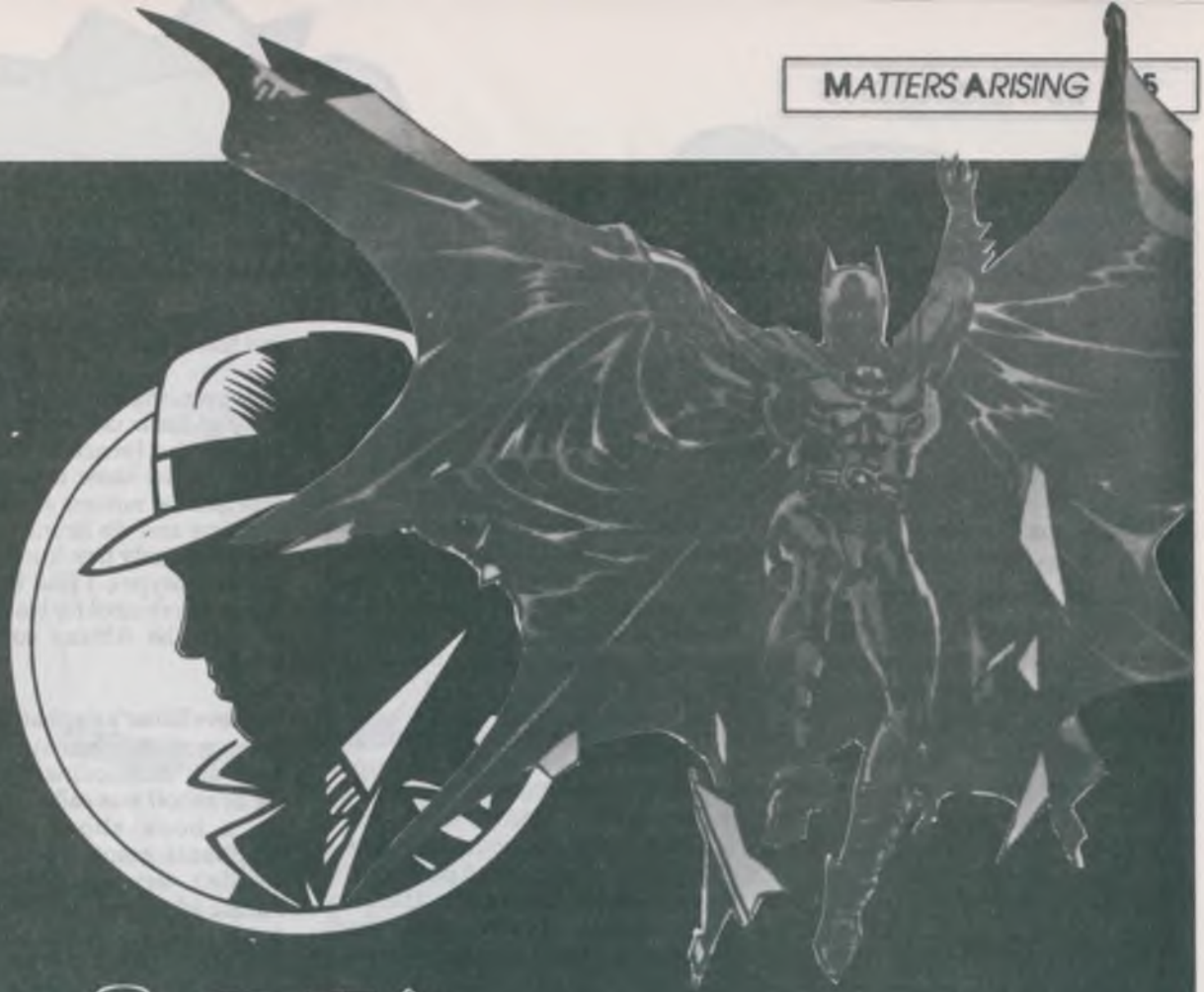
The movie *Dick Tracy* is the culmination of all these trends and has established some rules of its own. More obviously than anything before, it is a comic book without animation. Instead of expending a fortune on sets that recreate the departed world of 1930s Chicago, you draw panels that fill the screen and have the actors operate inside them. Faithfulness to the original is the guiding principle for the production. Taking care with

the period wardrobe is an old staple but it is doubtful that anyone has been so meticulous in realising the reach of a creator's grotesque imagination. Chester Gould caricatured his criminals with names and features of unremitting evil - Flat Top, Prune Face, Mumbles. Makeup and plastic moulds create literal representations of the crude line drawings of the comic strip originals. This is fidelity to the point of obsession.

It is interesting that two media, so interdependent, have moved poles apart. The movies in this genre are unreconstructed dream factory while the comics have become a dose of relevance. Batman of the comic book has come to face the bleakness of official corruption. He has taken on a boyfriend - once considered compulsory for the purposes of male reader identification - and let him go. He has avoided marriage and long-term emotional entanglements. He has known official police disapproval, the wrath of civil libertarians, the paralysis of moral dilemma.

The comic book *Batman* changed because the publishers, Detective Comics (DC), knew that they had to. They were losing their readers to a new publisher, Marvel Comics, where writers and artists had injected their characters with social relevance and a human dimension, however super those characters might be. *Dick Tracy* had faltered badly by the 60s, his advanced technology by then no more than cute, his murderous approach to the capture of criminals the opposite of cute. Marvel had characters who could no less withstand a nuclear explosion or fly faster than the speed of light, it had sluggers and masters of acrobatics but Marvel possessed characters whose consciences bled along with their skin, enveloped in doubts about personal worth, the relevance of their super powers in a corrupt and unequal world. Drugs, sex, relationships and careers became intrusions from the world of ordinary people.

The contemporary US Supreme Court appeared in the panels, secure in its liberal majority. Marvel had its characters concerned about the rights of the accused; if not they were in serious trouble with the authorities. This was



DICK TRACY

a radical departure for a readership long accustomed to omniscience, unfussed by the uncertainties of a trial jury or due process. Super-heroes were henceforth to be limited in their assumption of the sentencing role of the judiciary. (A consideration breached often by the defence of self, or a clear and present danger presenting itself to America and the Free World.)

Inulnerable and infallible were the proven formula of the 1930s comic book hero. DC's *Batman* and *Superman* were the market leaders, *Dick Tracy* was read by millions in newspapers across the English-speaking world.

In a world more questioning of authority, such heroes had fatal

limitations for the development of character, the variation of plot. DC responded by taking *Batman* back to basics. Abandoned in quick order were *Batman*'s high-camp image, technical gimmickry like the Batmobile, "Kapow", "Yow" and other sound effects screaming from the panels.

The *Batman* recovered his old name with his persona of mystery as he patrolled a crime-infested city by night. *Dick Tracy* rolled on and became simply ridiculous.

The two movies have adapted many of the elements of the first comic book appearances. They are brilliant workings of the absolutes of the 30s. *Batman* went one step further by

coupling the morality with the mood and location of 1989 - free market forces have made public safety subordinate to private vigilance, central planning is the province of crime. *Dick Tracy* is unapologetically the morality of the expectations imposed upon the scriptwriters of 1935.

Technology is what has made these movies possible: without the sophistication of modern special effects and animation, true-to-the-original comics on screen would have been a commercial disaster. These are movies that belong to no period, fantasies of a million childhoods that were awaiting the means for realisation.

RODNEY CAVALIER writes for the *Financial Review*.

No Babar-ian

The next Hollywood cartoon revival is Babar the Elephant. But is he a victim of colonialism?

David Nichols reports.

One summer evening in 1930, Mama invented a story of an intrepid elephant for five-year-old Laurent and four-year-old Mathieu. Mathieu had a stomach ache that night, and although Cecile de Brunhoff had never made up a story before, she created the tale in the hope of soothing him...the next day they repeated the story to their father. Papa - Jean de Brunhoff - decided to write it down and illustrate it, naming the elephant and embellishing the plot along the way."

All the principal characters in this tale are still alive - with the unfortunate exception of Jean de Brunhoff, who died in 1937 after completing seven immensely successful books about the kind, fair and extraordinarily nicely-dressed King of the Elephants (Cecile, by the way, refused to come up with any more stories). But Babar lived on through books by Jean's son, Laurent, and now, in his 60th year, looks healthier than ever.

Perhaps you've seen his ABC-TV series, or the bizarre plush toys that are currently available (I say 'bizarre' because the idea of a furry elephant in a furry green suit somehow just seems wrong). Babar is 'in' and he's going to get 'inner'. Now there are two more Babar products for his admirers young and old.

The first is a book, *The Art of Babar* by Nicholas Fox Weber. No, the crafty old thing hasn't started painting late in life like a big grey Grandma Moses. This book is about the kind of art that is normally dismissed as rather quaint - the pictures in children's books, in this case the de Brunhoffs'. Snobs are quickly catered for here with the revelation that both the de Brunhoffs

dabbled in art as well - in fact, Jean probably never considered himself primarily an author. He was a Dufy enthusiast - that probably shows in his books - and a number of his pleasant paintings are reproduced in the first few pages of *The Art of Babar*.

However, it is Babar, his creation and his implications that are dwelt upon in greater detail. Weber is intrigued by Babar's mother's death scene, and I must say it always bothered me as a child (we had the record of Peter Ustinov telling the story: Ustinov probably made the while thing much worse!). She is shot on the savannah by a cruel, faceless hunter; instantly, a surrogate steps in, in the form of an Old Lady who lives in a beautiful house in Paris. She dresses Babar, has him walking on two feet in no time and basically gets some culture into him.

Weber is quick to point out not only the civilising effect of clothes on Babar but the simple joy which he finds in the buying and the wearing of them. "What interested Babar most of all," says Jean de Brunhoff, "was two gentlemen he met in the street. He thought to himself: 'What lovely clothes they have got! I wish I could have some too! But how can I get them?'" After Babar is dressed, he has his photo taken. When his cousins Arthur and Celeste come to find him, Babar quickly has them dressed too (but not their big, naked mothers, who come in turn to find the cousins; possibly the older elephants are beyond civilising!)

Babar arrives back among the elephants at an opportune moment; the King of the Elephants has just died and a new king is being chosen. Cornelius, the oldest of the elephants, quickly sees the advantage of this self-made or maybe man-made jumbo. "My dear friends," he says, "we must have a new king. Why not choose Babar? He has come back from the

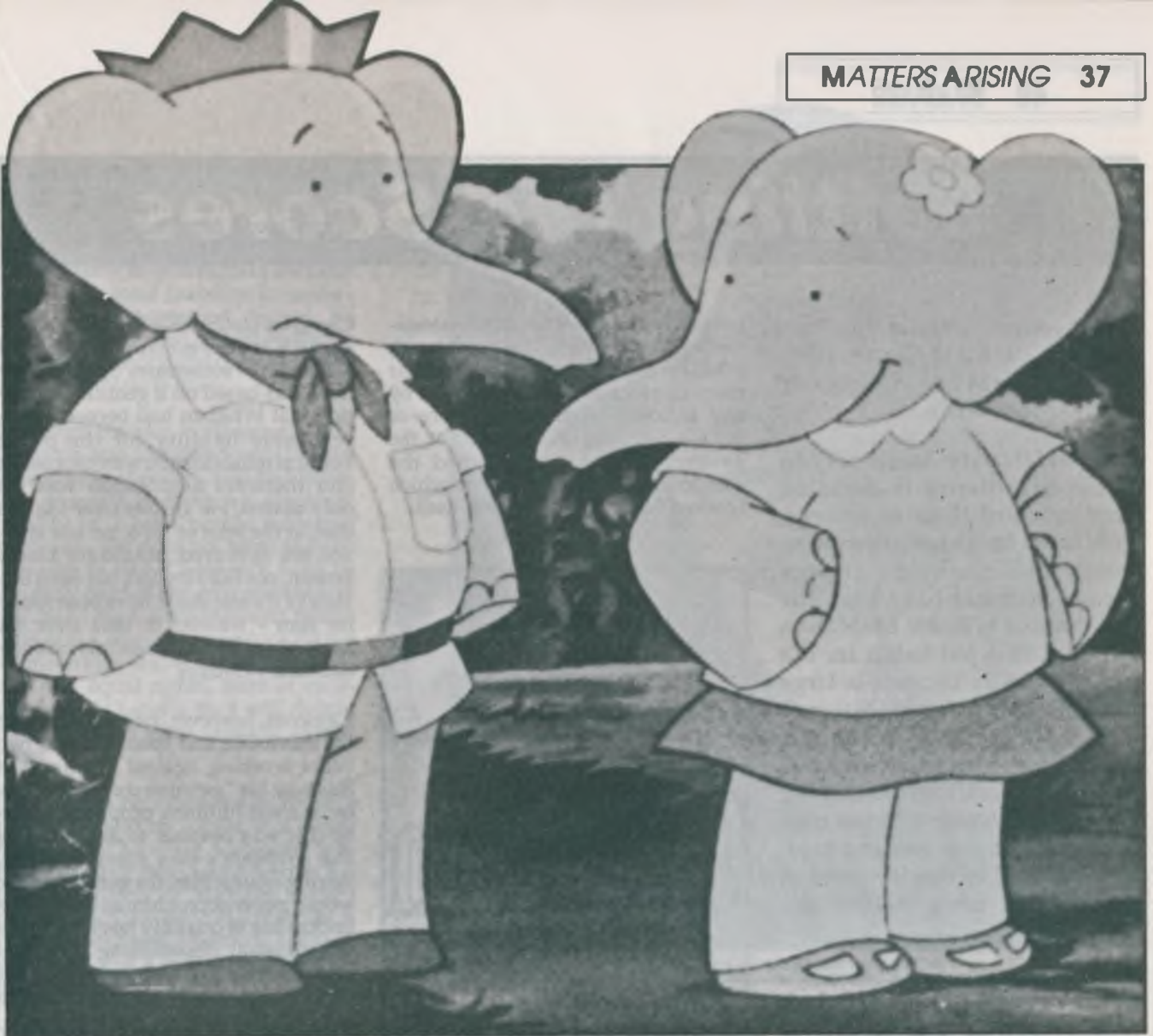
town where he has lived among men and learnt much."

However, the 'colonial' aspect of *The Story of Babar* can be overestimated. Though the French in the 1930s had many of the same unpleasant white supremacist notions as the English at the time and de Brunhoff Sr's work wasn't entirely free from (human) racial stereotypes, I find it hard to see Babar as a symbol for blacks in Africa, or even the African continent as a whole.

I believe Babar's elephantness is much more aesthetic than symbolic. He is, after all, extraordinarily handsome. De Brunhoff was called upon to make up a book about an elephant. Elephants come from Africa - he couldn't very well place them on a Pacific Island or on the Moon, could he? He is anthropomorphic, of course; and like all young creatures, he enjoys greatly buying things and dressing up. But even if Babar is Africa in transition, he is far too smart to be tainted by the wickedness of the West; he takes the bits he likes, but remains utterly unaffected by between-the-wars depression-era Europe. He's too smart.

The Art of Babar reveals many sides to the de Brunhoffs which have previously been obscure. Jean was a socialist ("though less political than most of his leftist family"), a fact which gives new meaning to his drawings of the wonderful city of Celesteville in 1933's *Babar The King*. "Happy workers in identical houses thrive under the strong leadership of a single benevolent leader: Babar" To reward the other elephants for building Celesteville, Babar has brought to Africa a huge amount of delightful gifts, clothes and trinkets...no wonder he's king!

However, the revelations *The Art of Babar* brings to our understanding of Babar are not political or psychological ones. If anything, the book's most important aspect is the way it traces Babar's development under Laurent de Brunhoff, whose work is generally considered inferior to his father's. While I still enjoy de Brunhoff Senior's books more than Junior's for their period look and attention to detail,



Laurent's work in the second half of *The Art of Babar* is often stunning.

He frankly admits that he doesn't enjoy labouring over the kind of intricacies his father put into the early Babar books; however, his Babar work has often been excellent. (His other books might well be even better. I was surprised to read a late '70s book of Laurent's called *The One Pig With Horns*, a surreal story in which an egotistical pig pulls his own head off, cries like a baby, and goes through many other startling transformations. This is the only non-Babar book of Laurent's I've seen - the others, described by Weber, sound just as good.)

Unfortunately, Laurent de Brunhoff, in his old age, has made one mistake that he might already be regretting. That's *Babar The Movie* which opens in Australia this month for the school holidays. Laurent sold the film rights to a Canadian company, Nelvana, because "they understood the impor-

ance of maintaining the spirit of the books" - but the result is largely disappointing.

This is not a de Brunhoff Babar story. It is the tale (told as a bedtime story) of a young King Babar (the problem of his mother's death doesn't enter into this version because here he apparently has no parents - like a Disney character). Babar and Celeste - child elephants - travel through the jungle to fight some wicked rhinoceroses who are threatening the peaceful elephant kingdom and who have kidnapped Celeste's mother.

It seems churlish to object to the American accents given to these beasts (would English or French accents have seemed any more sensible?) but there is something slightly nauseating about the way Celeste says Babar (Babbarrh) and, as for Zephir...his name rhymes with the way Americans would say 'deaf ear'. Just to add to the nuisance factors in this film, the two elephants and their

monkey friend meet a crocodile who, I finally figured out, is supposed to be Australian - a reference to Crocodile Dundee, presumably.

According to the production notes for *Babar The Movie*, director Alan Bunce "found that one of the main problems in bringing Babar to the screen was that his eyes had always been drawn just as dots, and so could not be used as a way of helping to show his emotions...One of the animators' solutions to this problem was to make the elephants use their trunks a lot, in ways expressive of their feelings." Great concept, guys. The young Babar was waving his trunk with glee just before his mother died in 1931.

Read the book, don't see the film.

The Art of Babar is published by Abrams Books. *Babar The Movie* screens in Hoyts cinemas from September.

DAVID NICHOLS is ALR's fads consultant.