

# PUSH THE WALL



My Life, Writing,  
Drawing, and the  
Art of Storytelling

WORKS BY  
**FRANK MILLER**

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*300*

*Xerxes*

*Bad Boy*

*The Big Guy and Rusty  
the Boy Robot*

*Frank Miller's RoboCop*

*Give Me Liberty*

*Martha Washington  
Goes to War*

*Hard Boiled*

*Tales to Offend*

*Spawn/Batman*

*All Star Batman & Robin,  
the Boy Wonder*

*Batman:  
Year One*

*Batman:  
The Dark Knight Returns*

*The Dark Knight  
Strikes Again*

*The Dark Knight III:  
The Master Race*

*The Dark Knight Returns:  
The Last Crusade*

*The Dark Knight Returns:  
The Golden Child*

*Daredevil*

*Daredevil: Man Without Fear*

*Daredevil: Born Again*

*Elektra: Assassin*

*Elektra Lives Again*

*Ronin*

*Frank Miller's Ronin Rising*

*Cursed*

*Spider-Man Annuals*



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## FRANK MILLER

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*To my father, Robert Whitley Miller,  
who showed me what work is.*

*And to my mother, Marjorie Brighman Miller,  
who told me I could.*



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# Prologue:

## A Letter to My Younger Self

*I started in a cold part of a cold city, and I was a cold-bellied youngster from cold Vermont, a lot bigger in ambition than prospects. It was nasty in Manhattan that winter of 1976. The city was in passionate disrepair. The sidewalks were broken dishware. The pavement, third-world rubble. "New York is over," said my West Coast friends. But there I was sharing a SoHo tenement flat with my high school friend Josie, learning from her so many of the city's secrets.*

*It wouldn't have looked like it to anybody, but this was chapter one of what was, for me, a grand adventure.*

Those long winter walks you're taking? The ones on which you stubbornly embark, despite Manhattan's frigid winds and lurking dangers and the unending, smudgy gray skies above? Those daily journeys are your way of welcoming life and experience, and doing some soul-forging of your own.

I'll place a big, fat bet that, right now, you're saying to yourself, "What the hell is he talking about? I just love the city streets. And it's the best way to pass the time when you have very little money." And you have a point. To walk and wonder is free of charge, even now in 2025, when the fat cats and power brokers would charge for the

air if they could. But, more than that, for you, New York is a Romantic place, in the poetic and artistic sense, romance with a capital *R*. There's romance of the heart, too, of course, and even objectively beautiful spots—Central Park in the snow comes to mind, as does the New York Public Library's Rose Reading Room on a rainy, fall afternoon. And most romantic of all is the city's soaring sense of *ambition*, exemplified by its glorious bridges and sky-piercing office towers. Romance is synonymous with love, ambition—and adventure. Life *must* be an adventure. That, or it is only dreary torment. But Romance isn't really what you're after at the moment. All that can wait.

What you're seeking is the city itself—the steam vapors and the flickering neon; the barflies, the hustlers, and the predawn hours when deals are done and banks are robbed; the sooty water tanks atop shabby buildings and empty diners on lonely, midnight-cloaked avenues; the slick, rainy streets after dark and the way they reflect the city back to itself. And you want to discover your place in this strange metropolis—writing and drawing day and night, letting it hum and filter through your pencil and into your creations. All those old movies you're watching on *Million Dollar Movie* are flooding you with the visual and verbal dialectic of classic American Film Noir. You want to live in that world; create wisecracking heroes and villains in black hats. You want to somehow get all that cigarette smoke and gunpowder burn into your drawings and dialogue. For you, despite its darkness, the rotting Big Apple is nothing short of a jeweled city, a circuit board of emotion and fascination, the dingy New York grid holding your imagination like the Lake District did for Wordsworth. Keats had his nightingale and that famous Grecian urn; you've got Hell's Kitchen, South Street, and the Lower East Side.

You want to be inspired and to make it happen—taste the fruit of your ambition. But you're now realizing it's tougher in reality than it was when you were dreaming it up back home in Vermont. Crime-ridden, drug-rattled, and disenfranchised, the city has certainly seen brighter days. It's worth remembering that in 1975, just

a year before you moved to the Village, New York was considered so bleak and neglected that President Gerald Ford reportedly told the entire city to “Drop Dead” while playing hardball with federal loans for cleaning up the place. This later proved apocryphal, but it doesn’t matter—the damage was done, America turned its back on Gotham. You didn’t care, though, you moved there anyway, you were answering a call. You saw right past all that, focusing instead on the city’s unceasing pulse, great buildings, and mythological power. So what if it had more than its fair share of thieves and druggies and lost souls? You take the good with the bad. And the good? The place was a hub of free thought, creative drive, and, of course, comic book legends, the ones you’ve looked up to since you were a kid. Hooked after your first few visits when you were seventeen, a drawing table in New York was your destiny.

So, on this February day in 1976, as you brace for the cold to go out once more to walk and experience, you’re still feeling it—that buzz from the city and your bubbling aspirations. By the time you’re reading this, you know what happened next, but allow me to recount it here so I can relive it.

This is how I remember it.

As you step out into the street, you realize the city buzz is wearing off. You’re hungry. (As you well know, I had an adolescent’s view on things, so I didn’t do much of a job of feeding myself. I’d gorge on peanut butter sandwiches to save up for a bacon cheeseburger dinner.) But now it dawns on you that the gnawing pit in your stomach is more than hunger pain. Worry is seeping in, stirring up trouble. There’s more lint in your pocket than change. You also realize that the soles of your shoes are so thin that one could consider them nonexistent. You start asking the big questions: Why am I here? What am I going to do? Is this really what life does to a person? And you’re asking the small, more expedient ones, too: Where’s my next meal going to come from? How am I going to pay the rent? Poverty isn’t simple; it’s endlessly complicated.

And it's then that you start conjuring home. But it's not Vermont in the snow, it is Vermont in the spring and summer, when it's warm. You picture the family house and the town of Berlin, and you see the rivers and streams and undulating Vermont-green hills—your American Eden. You hear the waters of the creek where you hunted for tadpoles and crawfish and built dams from mud and rock. Dinner's served picnic-style at a long table overlooking the family home, dear old "Ledgewood," a big old house full of handmade quilts and fresh-cut flowers and wall-to-wall books and noisy kids. All six of your brothers and sisters are there and your father looks out the window, enjoying a very rare day off. As she spreads out the food, your mother, while not in her nurse's scrubs, remains every bit the nurturer, the person you most want to see when you're not feeling yourself. You start to realize just how beautiful it all was, just how lucky you had it. Let me tell you, though, even now as you're reading this, you're only a quarter of the way to an understanding. You won't fully grasp it till you're much older. You'll go back home to visit, and you'll realize Thomas Wolfe was right—you truly can't go home again. The place will look smaller, the water will have lost a bit of its glisten. Some of the wonder will have left the woods. The picnic table by the pond will be gone and your parents, too. That old tire you swung on, giving yourself a view of the whole valley? It's gone. So is the ancient maple on which it hung. And then "home" will become a part of the castle of memory to which you retreat when the world becomes too much.

But I digress. It's just then, when you're pining for home and starting to panic, that you look around and realize you're standing on a sidewalk in far west Greenwich Village with no direction home, but not in a good way, like in Dylan's song. You're hungry and you're broke. You look down, and under your left foot, poking out from your near-soleless shoe, you see a twenty-dollar bill. You pick it up and you are in awe. Sometimes you've just got to believe in angels. There's instant relief, of course—there's at least *some* money for food. You

can build on that. The panic subsides and you're starting to feel restored, even a little warmth returns. It's a golden moment and you definitely feel it—your luck changing, a small shift in the world. It all seems possible again, your reason to be comes back. You feel the need to draw and write—to think and create. You want to get back to the apartment, back to your drawing table. But first you need food.

You march off to the old Sheridan Square coffee shop you frequent. The woman behind the counter couldn't be nicer. She winks at you as if she knows what happened. You stop shivering and you order a coffee. You pull the twenty out to admire it. You don't ponder the why or how of it, you just think, "So this is how it goes." You return it to your pocket, but quickly check to make sure it's really there. You order a bacon double cheeseburger and fries. You swear it's the best meal of your life. You will never forget it.

And I don't have to tell you, because you're now living it, but this was a hinge moment, it was a genuine turning point from that lucky twenty. Neal Adams, the comic book master who you pestered and who agreed to look at your stuff, finally said that your drawings were "no longer horrible." You, and the hundreds of others he would help in his lifetime. He was the stern sensei, determined to move comic books forward into an era even *he* could not have imagined. Adams was rough on you, yes, but you were lucky that he took you on. Always blunt and demanding, he was also endlessly generous with his time. His presence was electric. Give yourself a pat on the back because it was your persistence and sense of purpose that landed you by his side. The man taught you some valuable lessons. Principal among these: Despite what so many people tell you, go ahead and take criticism personally. Take it damn seriously. Let it hurt. That will make you remember it. That will make you learn from it. Humiliation can make you crumple, yes, but it can also make you tough.

For what's it worth, I still think this way and use it to propel my work. So that's a lesson for life right there. And I'm here to tell you

that it was Neal who introduced you to the notion that an artist has a particular role in the world: he or she is a problem solver. Artists know how things work. They figure it all out on the page, on the canvas, on the whatever. I bet you spout off about the importance of failure and craft to anyone within earshot now. Well, it was Neal who beat that into you. That's because, either by words or example, Stan Drake and other mentors Neal may have had drilled that into him. A dedication to craft and process and an undying commitment to hard work is the only true path to artistic achievement.

Thanks to Neal you're now at Western Publishing's Gold Key Comics. I know Gold Key is struggling, but the whole industry took a hit when television and animated cartoons changed the game. Those holdouts from the McCarthy era over at the Comics Code Authority aren't helping matters either. Hard to believe that with all that's out there in film and television—particularly in the mid- to late seventies, a time known for dark and challenging art, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* being an obvious example—those stuffed shirts down in that tiny office can still wield power and censor anything, much less comic books. It's a difficult time for your chosen medium, but it won't last. So hang tight.

Gold Key's not exactly where you want to be for the rest of your life, but don't let ambition cloud your judgment. It's work and you're damned grateful for it. Those three-page *Twilight Zone* comics have taught and will continue to teach you more than you realize. (They'd better! Your per-page rate for finished black and white artwork is a whopping *twenty-five bucks*, putting you *way* below the poverty line.) Rest easy, you're exactly where you need to be—toiling in relative obscurity. "Paying your dues," as they call it, and learning your craft, line by line, inch by inch: the anatomy, the perspective, the expressions, the buildings, the cars, the million drawing problems, the million drawing decisions, and the million *cartooning* decisions, all in

your hands and nobody else's. All of it is up to you and only you. Besides, you learn how to draw a decent enough Rod Serling.

Grappling with all that now, you're trying to harness the power that's flowing from the act of figuring it all out, and from your influences, too—Kirby, Eisner, and Adams; Film Noir; crime novels; and those Westerns you still love as much as you did when you were a boy. You want to puzzle out how to blend them into your own style, to create something new while not forgetting those who came before you. It's a tall order, remember that. I know patience isn't easy for you, but you've got to embrace it, even cherish it. You're going to need it.

Some of the old-timers you encounter there are industry legends, like *Flash* artist Carmine Infantino, and old Joe Orlando, veteran of the 1950s EC Comics line and longtime assistant to the legendary Wallace Wood. All this will benefit you in so many ways, particularly after your next professional move to Marvel Comics and all *those* adventures to come, where a who's who of comic book giants await. You'll settle into your next job and find your voice, get into a groove. You'll find that thing that's been eluding you. But I don't want to ruin any future surprises. Suffice it to say, there is so much more in store for you. New York will provide, and your hard work and dedication to the process, not the outcome, will pay off in huge dividends. The chapters of your life are full of revelations, twists, and turns, and more of those hinge moments that alter your course.

Like I said, I don't want to go into specifics of what's coming down the pike—I want you to experience them as you are meant to: at full velocity and in intense and vivid colors. But I can't resist giving you a quick sketch. Believe it or not, you are going to reimagine one of the world's most treasured superheroes. More than that, you're going to do it in your own way and in your own style. The world will embrace your vision. This will bring you success, some fortune, and a lot of madness—more than you're prepared for. There will be ego trips, excess, the trapdoors and funhouse mirrors of fame,

fiery fallout, and a rock bottom, but from the ashes Opportunity and Freedom will rise. You'll leave the throb and gloom of New York for sunny Los Angeles and the bizarro world of Hollywood. In Los Angeles, you will embrace collaboration, witness astounding levels of expertise in every area imaginable, and learn from others, even those you'd never dream you'd work with. And you'll discover they value work and creativity just as much as you do. You'll take on new titles and you'll see through a new lens, both literally and figuratively.

I'm not one to pull punches, so I'll be straight with you: the obstacles will stack up along the way. Your hero's journey is riddled with them. There are villains out there in the world and also more than a few skulking around in your inner life, too. You don't know it yet, but artists have to contend with the world, sometimes over and over again. On the horizon is rejection, and I hate to break it to you, but it pretty much stays there. On the flip side, failure becomes just another word for opportunity. Thick skin is required. Hard work is as vital as inspiration and humility turns out to be an orchard.

So the sooner you develop a sense of humor, the better. Never ever forget that a setback is a lesson, and an outright failure is nothing less than a master class.

I don't like to lean on advice platitudes, so I'll give it my own spin.

To contend with all this, you do have a handful of superpowers. Simple ones, really.

You are persevering and devoted to your art—you don't give up easily and learned early on to take one on the chin or in the stomach. This will allow you to get back in the ring time after time. You're here to tell stories with pictures and words. Anything or anybody who gets in the way of that is an obstacle, or worse.

You are receptive and infinitely curious. Use that. Don't get bored. If you're bored, those who look at your art and read your writing will be bored, too. If you do get bored, burn it all down and start over.

Torch the institutionalized laziness dressed up as “tradition” that strangles fresh ideas. Be unafraid to radically challenge the status quo. A sense of artistic freedom and a horizon of possibility will be your reward.

Always remember: A good story starts with a problem. Your hero or heroine must solve this problem. He or she will face obstacles and encounter rivals, allies, friends, and enemies in seeking to solve that problem. It’s that simple—and that difficult.

This is as good a place as any to bring this to a close. I know you’re itching to get back to it. I don’t want to be the one to stand in your way. Work is never done, which is a good thing, since it will be the one thing that lifts you when you need it most. And our kind of work takes everything you’ve got. So be diligent and bold, two essentials for living an examined, creative life. But before you go back to the drawing table, take another long walk. The metropolis awaits. There’s a villain and hero just a couple of blocks from where you sit, and a storyline prowling in the alleyway. And always keep a twenty in your pocket as a reminder and a talisman. I wish I would have. But, if I’m going to practice what I preach, I suppose it’s never too late to start.

Do or Die,

A stylized handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'JM' in a bold, cursive script, with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the bottom of the 'M'.



## LESSON 1

# PUSH THE WALL, DEFY THE CODE

Find Out What You're Made Of  
and See Where You Can Go



**H**ow to start a story?  
At the ending.

Know your ending.

I repeat: *Know your ending.*

Before you launch your ships, you've got to know where they're going. Once you've locked in the conclusion, your every scene will be somehow aimed like a spearpoint at that ending. There. Now you can start. Tell whoever's watching who the hero is, and then get that hero into trouble *right quick*. By getting your hero into trouble, he'll show you who he is. And the odds have got to be against our heroes—that's what made the story of the three hundred Spartans a source of lasting inspiration.

You'll need your backstories, too, for all your characters and for

your world. Some of it you can make up as you go along, sure, but the more preparation, the better. Retrofitting can be a clumsy trap.

So prepare carefully. Know where you're going. Then start the action *as late as possible*—throw the poor reader into it at the *last possible second*. Embroider as you go—details will provide themselves.

But let's not forget, your characters need an environment—a setting replete with atmosphere and obstacles to overcome and villains to defeat. A world that shapes them and hurls them into light and shadows. Take *Sin City*: Who is Marv without the grime and grift of Basin City? And the New York City underworld is the perfect incubator for Elektra's transformation into Kingpin's chief assassin. A place is often defined by those that inhabit it, the restless souls who wreak havoc on it, redeem it, or seek solace from it. Batman's relentless pursuit of justice casts a light on Gotham's darkest corners.

My comics often start as unformed masses of character, place, and language that form in my brain and make their way onto my drawing board. There's nothing mystical about it. More than anything, it all begins with a hunger for a type of story (Crime? Horror? Romance?), then to character (Hero? Victim? Villain?)—then to world. And this world and this character must both reflect and define each other.

But for our purposes here, let's start with a world. Vermont of my childhood. To quote the Bard, I came mewling and puking into life in Olney, MD, which, in 1957, was a community in transition, a small town in the sprawling Maryland farmland mutating into a DC suburban satellite in the post-World War II boom. After leaving Maryland, we spent a short time in the Berkshire mountain town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, but it was Berlin, Vermont, where the world came into focus for me. I took shape on the drawing board of central Vermont, in its idyllic countryside where rivers and forests ramble and gather in the foothills of the Green Mountains. Mother Nature was kind to Vermont, that's for sure.