

Bill Rea ? Batman forever!



I was reminded over the weekend of a conversation in which I was involved more than 50 years ago.

I was in Grade 2 and munching on a tuna sandwich in school lunch room.

It was a segregated lunch room by tradition, as opposed to any signs or barriers. The girls all sat on one side and talked as they ate, discussing whatever unimportant stuff little girls talked about in the those days. The other side of the room is where the boys congregated, and being aspiring young men, we naturally discussed important stuff.

This particular day, the topic was one of the more crucial ones of the period; we were talking about Batman.

That was the show everyone watched (with the possible exception of my parents), and it was discussed at length by little kids who didn't know enough to talk about politics (and as we all know, there are a lot of adults out there talking about politics who know nothing).

The day in question, one of my classmates, a boy named Patrick, came out with this bold assertion: 'Batman will never die!'

The situation required a bit of practicality, and I was delighted to provide it by pointing out the actor who played Batman (I hadn't committed his name to memory by that point) would die some day, but they would find someone else to play him.

The actor's name was Adam West, and it was learning of his death Saturday afternoon that reminded me of the conversation in which I engaged more than 50 years ago. It was one of those times when I wished my accurate prediction had been wrong.

It was a special time to be a kid, when the biggest hero was a Caped Crusader who was joined by his teenage Boy Wonder sidekick, running around in their underwear fighting crooks and trying to make a bumbling police department look good. It was trendy, it was campy, and it was usually stupid, at times bordering on idiotic. But the kids watched it, as did a lot of adults.

I read West's autobiography some years ago, in which he related that the first couple of weeks of the show didn't seem to be going well. He started feeling more confident one night when he stopped in a store on the way home and overheard two women commenting that they had to hurry because Batman was coming on TV.

My brother and I had various babysitters when we were kids, and one of them, a rather elderly lady, happened to be on the job one night when Batman was on, and she let us watch it. I think there was a certain amount curiosity involved, since she told us she had never heard of Batman.

It was a case of love at first sight. We detected a certain amount of frustration when she realized she would have to wait until the next night to find out how the Dynamic Duo would get out of the cliffhanging predicament they found themselves in. We could tell she noted the days and time when the show was on.

Then there was the Halloween party at the school, and a band had been commissioned. Actually, it was a couple of guys playing guitars with another guy banging on some drums. To little kids, these guys were just a couple of steps below the Beatles. And they had their audience sold when they played their version of the Batman theme song, even going to the trouble of memorizing the lyrics. Patrick was especially impressed. He was in his Batman costume.

One sometimes comes upon reruns of Batman on TV. Occasionally they can be found on the internet. When the opportunity presents itself, I will usually watch them.

I think like most people, I believe the villains were the best part of the whole thing. They were colourful characters and there were a lot of prominent actors ready to play them. That included the likes of eventual Oscar winner Cliff Robertson, horror film artist Vincent Price and Roddy McDowall.

Of course, there were the core criminals, like the Riddler, the Joker, Penguin, Catwoman, etc. They were formidable adversaries for the Caped Crusader and the Boy Wonder, but the good guys always did prevail, did they not? But of course ? they were the heroes. There are a couple of websites out there aimed at critiquing the series, episode by episode. For the most part, they are the products of individuals, thus they represent the opinions of individuals. That means we're all free to agree or disagree.

I was never a big fan of the episodes involving Catwoman. I don't mean that to be sexist, and I certainly don't want my cat-loving wife to get mad at me. There were plenty of female villains who all but stole the show for me. Shelley Winters as Ma Parker springs readily to mind. I think it was the love-hate dynamic for Batman that Julie Newmar projected that turned off seven-year-old boys. Those kinds of story lines was why they invented soaps.

Victor Buono, playing King Tut, was probably my favourite villain.

I've also never been much of a fan of the Batman movies that have come out in the last 20 years or so. These films are too dark, focusing too much on that trend we see today; letting special effects and the desire to be graphic get in the way of telling good stories.

That is essentially what Batman was. Sometimes the story telling was good, and sometimes it wasn't. That's the way life works.

Patrick was right. Batman will never die. Alas, I was right too.

Adam West is gone. His acting career probably didn't quite go the way he would have liked. The obituaries I have read make lots of reference to Batman, meaning he was typecast.

But he brought a lot of joy to many. I was in that group. I was a grateful little boy.

I still am.