

## Holy Batman! Caped Crusader Returns in Dark Tale: Rick Warner

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

June 17 (Bloomberg) -- The Batman movie franchise, which sank lower than the Batcave in the hands of Joel Schumacher, makes a roaring comeback under the energetic and creative direction of Christopher Nolan.

``Batman Begins'' is darker and meatier than any of the four previous entries in the modern series that began with Tim Burton's wickedly entertaining ``Batman'' and ``Batman Returns'' before falling into superhero purgatory with Schumacher's misguided ``Batman Forever'' and ``Batman & Robin.''

A prequel that tells how millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne evolved into Gotham's No. 1 crime fighter, ``Batman Begins'' won't please fans who are looking for a jokey comic-book experience or those who think Michael Keaton was the definitive Batman. For the open-minded, though, Nolan's backstory provides a chilling, thrilling and, at times, moving account of the origins of the Caped Crusader.

Nolan, a 34-year-old Brit best known for quirky films like ``Memento'' and ``Insomnia,''' was an unlikely choice to revive a pop-culture icon. Yet he succeeds magnificently, largely because he isn't bound by the formulas or limitations of his Batman predecessors. While there's the usual high-tech gadgets (including a Batmobile that looks like a Hummer on steroids), eerie settings (parts were filmed atop an Icelandic glacier) and arch-villains, the movie is more concerned with human emotions and motivation than superhuman powers and special effects.

### Bulked-Up Bale

The star-studded cast includes Liam Neeson as Wayne's martial arts and philosophy mentor; Michael Caine as Alfred, the loyal butler of Wayne Mansion; Tom Wilkinson as a ruthless crime boss; Cillian Murphy as a crooked, diabolical psychiatrist; Gary Oldman as one of the few honest cops in Gotham; Rutger Hauer as the Wayne Enterprises chief executive who's looking to get rich quick by taking the company public; Morgan Freeman as Wayne's ally in the family business; and Katie Holmes, Tom Cruise's main squeeze, as Bruce's childhood friend, now a righteous prosecutor determined to fight Gotham's criminal power

structure.

But it's Christian Bale, as Wayne/Batman, who carries the movie. Bale, who starved himself into a skeletal-look for ``The Machinist,`` has bulked up into the most muscular Batman yet, with bulging pecs and biceps that require little padding from his armor-plated Batsuit.

### Vigilante Justice

More important than Bale's physique is his ability to convey the emotional journey that young Wayne takes after seeing his philanthropist parents murdered by a thug on the mean streets of Gotham, a city that is being destroyed by crime, poverty and corruption.

Racked by guilt -- his parents had just left a production of Boito's opera ``Mefistofele`` before it was over because Bruce was scared by the spooky story -- Wayne embarks on a lifelong search for the meaning of justice. It culminates with his rebirth as Batman, a do-gooder who relies on consummate fighting skills and futuristic crime-fighting tools rather than X-ray vision, jet-like speed or other supernatural powers.

Wayne travels to a mysterious, Himalayan mountain retreat, where Neeson teaches him how to sword fight, dispenses fortune-cookie wisdom (``Anger gives you great power, but if you let it, it will destroy you``) and attempts to recruit him to join a vigilante group called the League of Shadows that prefers summary executions to reading suspects their Miranda rights.

When Wayne objects, Neeson and his cohorts try to pulverize him, but he manages to escape and return to Gotham. Back home, he has an epiphany related to a boyhood accident in a cave, thus giving him the idea of dressing up as a bat and saving the world.

### Envious Gates

I won't burden you with too many details here, but suffice it to say that Batman crushes the evildoers with an impressive display of smarts, courage and enough electronic toys to make Bill Gates envious. Unfortunately, Nolan can't resist the temptation to stretch the story out with all-too-familiar car chases, explosions and other whiz-bang sequences that make the 137-minute movie about 20 minutes too long.

``Batman Begins,`` from Warner Bros. Entertainment, is playing worldwide.