

Patrick McDonald: ‘The Dark Knight Rises’ is Glorious Epic of Heroic Proportions

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sound the gong for one of the best films of the summer, as “The Dark Knight Rises” delivers an awe-inspiring blockbuster on virtually every level of storytelling and performance. Christian Bale, Anne Hathaway, Gary Oldman, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and director Christopher Nolan create grand, metaphoric and visionary cinema.

From the first flicker of a spectacular airplane hijack, to the rich and expressive conclusion, the Batman film again establishes a new high mark of this now peculiar genre of superhero movies. It deftly balances the wild psychological ramifications in The Batman character of protector, vigilante, fight expert and human being with the majestic action sequences, which fit perfectly within the context of a story that makes the strange cityscape of Gotham emblematic of our current fears and expectations.

Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) has retired The Batman in the eight years since he defeated The Joker, and is still used as a scapegoat in the death of “Two-Face” Harvey Dent. Gotham City exploits Dent’s memory as a excuse to virtually eliminate crime in the city, by using extreme incarceration and laws that suppress due process. Commissioner Gordon (Gary Oldman) is put front and center with the success, and keeps the truth about The Batman’s role in Dent’s demise to himself. There is one cop named Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who becomes a skeptic, and his origin and obsessions match Gotham’s caped crime fighter.



Confrontation: Bane (Tom Hardy) and The Batman (Christian Bale) in ‘The Dark Knight Rises’
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Two new villains are on the horizon. The vicious Bane (Tom Hardy) and a mysterious master cat burglar named Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway). Both spur Bruce Wayne to end his retirement of The Batman, much to the chagrin of his caregiver Alfred (Michael Caine). But this re-emergence is fraught with uncertainty, having to do with a failed invention of Wayne Enterprises – created by Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) – that Bane wants to possess. In the confrontation between The Batman and Bane, the hero will be challenged to again save Gotham City, if only he can save himself.

In the realm of the superhero film, the reason the Dark Knight series advances beyond the the others in the genre is that it relies on an insane, dark soul to figure out what is appropriate to satisfy The Batman's obsessive revenge motivation, which often has nothing to do with the outside evil he fights. This psychosis is familiar to anybody who has struggled to do the right thing, because the right thing often changes and blurs as society reflects itself in the mirror. The genius of brothers Christopher and Jonathan Nolan's screenplay, and Christopher Nolan's direction, is that they make all the characters look in that mirror and in many cases go through it.

Another key is the casting. Christian Bale is an absolute honest performer as Bruce/Batman, and he has to carry the film much more broadly than in "The Dark Knight." He is put through a ringer in this one, but here is much more nimble with the character. Anne Hathaway, who took some fanboy scorn when she was cast as Selina Kyle, is tart and salacious as basically a thief who has to come in from the cold. Michael Caine gets to show off his chops, and even gets a couple scenes that are a reminder of his suave movie characters. Gary Oldman, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, the little-seen-lately Matthew Modine, Morgan Freeman, Marion Cotillard and villain Tom Hardy all have their place in the Gotham universe, and all bring fresh and exciting takes to the often overwrought supporting roles in superhero movies.

What may be most impressive is the symbolism that is woven into every scene. The "rising" of the Dark Knight immediately brings to mind Jesus, but Bruce Wayne's resurrection comes after many more trials and crucifixions. The villain Bane, in his rampage, wants to take Gotham City back for the "people," but squelches dissent through intimidation and kangaroo courts, that asks the prosecuted to cross over a frozen river in exile. These quasi-religious and governmental themes resonate without interfering in a story that seeks to bring those themes to evolution.



Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway) Rides into View in 'The Dark Knight Rises'
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

And finally, it's a monumental comic book story, the kind that redefined the landscape in the early 1970s, matured in the 1980s with the Dark Knight books by Frank Miller and is brought into focus in the previous film entries, "Batman Begins" and "The Dark Knight." As "The Dark Knight Rises" culminated like grand opera, with each character trying to understand their place in this Gotham state of being, my tears flowed like I was experiencing the final aria, as my youthful comic book love was nurtured anew and blossomed again from under the hard shell of my own darkness.

There is a foreign language chant in the film, one that is repeated over and over as an ultimate challenge is attempted within the story, one that is highly emblematic of everything the movies wants to accomplish. There is no surprise when the translation is revealed as "rise, rise, rise..."

"The Dark Knight Rises" opens everywhere on July 20th. Featuring Christian Bale, Anne Hathaway, Michael Caine, Gary Oldman, Marion Cotillard, Morgan Freeman, Matthew Modine, Tom Hardy and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Screenplay by Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan. Directed by Christopher Nolan. Rated "PG-13"

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