

## University to Confer World's 1st Doctor of Comic Books Degree

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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Batman Exec Producer Michael Uslan to be Honored  
for His Work Legitimizing the Genre

Comic books as a legitimate form of American art and literature?

Their time has come.

On Oct. 10, New Jersey's Monmouth University will confer the world's first fine arts doctorate in comic books on Michael Uslan, the originator and executive producer of the blockbuster Batman movie franchise that began in 1989, including the recent Dark Knight trilogy.

It's a long overdue recognition for an industry that was derided and vilified for decades, says Uslan, who wrote about his comic obsession and its positive effect on his life in his memoir, *The Boy Who Loved Batman* ([www.theboywholovedbatman.com](http://www.theboywholovedbatman.com)).

"This will have a tremendously positive impact on the industry, the fans, the artists and writers," he says. "With the recognition by academia of comic books as expressions of fine art, we'll see more talented people going into the industry, and they will continue to innovate, refine and redefine this art form and the art of graphic story-telling."

The university chose Uslan for the honor because of his decades of work establishing the genre as an important element of American art and culture, said Monmouth President Paul G.

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Gaffney II.

“We are proud to award Michael Uslan an honorary degree in the ‘fine art of comic books,’ ” he said. “Through his work and teaching, he has shown the world that comics are a legitimate art form and uniquely American.”

Uslan, who taught the world's first accredited college course in comics at Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind., in 1971, also wrote the first textbook on comics, “The Comic Book In America.” Today, many colleges and universities offer comics courses.

Uslan's drive to change the way society views comic books dates to childhood, when he recognized the heroes he so admired were often portrayed in media as campy characters not to be taken seriously. As he grew older, he learned the dark history of the American comic book, which first appeared in 1934.

“After World War II, there was a spike in juvenile crime. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham blamed comic books in his book, ‘Seduction of the Innocent’,” Uslan says, “that led to a 1954 Senate investigation into comic books and their alleged deleterious effects on America's youth, including the notion they caused asthma because comic book readers stayed indoors to read instead of playing outside in the fresh air.”

“During that period, the general public viewed comic books as poison. Many parents wouldn't let their kids near a comic book. There were comic book burnings,” Uslan says. “From the 1930s to the '70s, people in the industry were derided for working in the world of comics. They were looked down upon by society.”

Meanwhile, artists and writers – notably Stan Lee, former editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics and co-creator of iconic heroes such as Spider-Man and the Avengers – were weaving a modern American mythology, Uslan says.

He points to these reasons why America is finally now, rightfully, embracing its unique art form.

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- Comic books are a mirror of American society. Sociologically, since the 1930s they've been reflecting our changing culture, our values, mores, fashions and fads, warts and all, prejudices and biases included.
- Comic heroes are our modern mythology. The only difference between them and the ancient Greek gods is that our super-heroes and super-villains today wear Spandex and capes. But like the ancient gods, they reinforce values, convey moral lessons and provoke important discussions about ethics.
- The explosion of blockbuster feature films based on comic books and graphic novels has made American comics a global fascination. Uslan's 1989 "Batman," directed by Tim Burton, ushered in a new dark and serious portrayal of comic book heroes on the big screen. His 2008 "The Dark Knight" and this year's "The Dark Knight Rises" opened the door to other comic-based blockbusters, from "The X-Men" and "Spider-Man" to "The Avengers" and "Iron Man." These movies are influencing every aspect of culture, from video games to fashion trends. By 2013, comic book conventions will be bursting on the scene overseas, proving that the characters and stories the creators have given us have the power to cross cultures as well as borders.
- Comics have earned recognition in the art world. Comic book exhibits have been displayed in the galleries of noted art museums from the Smithsonian Institution to the Louvre to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the United Nations.

"Next," says Uslan, "I'd like to see creative geniuses from the industry like the venerable Stan Lee recognized with Kennedy Center Honors for their achievements. What were once simply comic books are now being translated into the performing arts and it's a crime that neither Stan nor any other creator from the field of American comic books and graphic novels has ever been recognized and honored by that illustrious group."

"And if it's a crime, it means that Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, The Hulk and the rest will be after them if they don't make it right."

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### About Michael Uslan

Michael Uslan, ( [www.theuslancompany.com](http://www.theuslancompany.com) ), is the Originator, and Executive Producer along with his partner Benjamin Melniker, of the Batman franchise of motion pictures. In his 36 years in the film and television industry, he has been involved with such projects as "National Treasure," "Constantine," and numerous animated projects. His projects have won Oscars, Golden Globes and Emmy Awards. He is the author of "The Boy Who Loved Batman," his autobiography, now in bookstores and at [amazon.com](#)

He recently donated over 40,000 comic books and items from his collection to Indiana University's Lilly Library.