

**(BIRDS OF PREY)****BAT TO THE FUTURE**

A well-known comic-book Caped Crusader gets in touch with his feminine side in the WB's *Birds of Prey*

Holy mythological makeovers! Having scored a surprise hit by dressing a teenage Clark Kent in *Dawson's Creek* drag, the comic geniuses who gave us *Smallville* are poised to Botox the Batman universe in *Birds of Prey*, a stylish, fast-paced pastiche of "zap!" "powl!" comic-book visuals and *Sex and the City*-style career-gal angst. Adapted from the DC Comics series, *Birds* is set in New Gotham City seven years after an evening of Joker-choreographed mayhem has left Barbara Gordon (a.k.a. Batgirl) paralyzed, Selina Kyle (a.k.a. Catwoman) dead, and Kyle's daughter, Helena, in Gordon's care. Unaware that he has a daughter—with their commitment to full-body latex, how *did* he and Catwoman conceive a child?—Batman has skipped town, leaving Helena with father issues and Gotham with a gaping hole in its crime-fighting infrastructure. To patch that breach, Gordon has ditched her Bat-duds and resurfaced as a computer expert named Oracle. "I can hack into anything and find the unfindable," says actress Dina Meyer, who plays the wheelchair-bound whiz. "I'm kind of like Big Brother." From her secret lair in the New Gotham Clocktower, she dispenses tech support to Helena (portrayed by breakout star Ashley Scott), now in her early 20s and ambivalently embracing the family business as a feral vigilante known as the Huntress. Rounding out the team is fresh-scrubbed recruit Dinah Lance (willowy Canadian Rachel Skarsten), a telepathic teenage runaway in search of the acceptance only a surrogate family of gorgeous superheroes can provide.

Thanks to its Batman legacy, *Birds of Prey* has been attracting intense scrutiny on the Web for months. "Someone wrote on a message board that I look like a wimp," says Skarsten, an ice hockey goalie, "but I was like, 'I'll show you!'" Perhaps the only impediment to the team's ass-kicking is the women's wardrobe: "They're redesigning my costume," says Scott of her original cape-and-bustier Huntress ensemble. "I want to look sexy, but I have to be able to fight, too. And I was having a hard time breathing in that thing, much less doing a roundhouse kick." G. BEATO



The ultimate weapon in crime-fighting—bare midrifts: *Birds of Prey*'s comely cast



"Work pants in space? Highly illogical, captain"

(FIREFLY)**HAPPY (VAPOR) TRAILS**

Set your faces to stunned: *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon's latest venture is...a Western in outer space?

Being Joss Whedon, the architect of TV staples *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, means you get to enjoy niceties like massive soundstages and armies of craftsmen building sets for your big-budget sci-fi Western, *Firefly*. But it also means millions of viewers—not to mention corporate parent Fox—will be watching to see if your next project becomes a monster hit or if it just, well, crashes and burns. "That pressure is always there," says Whedon. "It doesn't get bigger or smaller." The *Toy Story* scribe's new series significantly ups the ante from the exploits of a certain nemesis of the undead, chronicling the journeys of a nine-person ensemble traveling aboard the 190-foot starship *Serenity* some 500 years in the future.

But don't reach for that tricorder just yet, pardner: While the morally fuzzy antiheroes visit distant planets and talk to holograms, they also fire pistols, get in bar fights, and make frequent visits to the ship's courtesan ("or as I like to call her, a whore," says Whedon). "It's not like, 'Wow, everything is so great in the future,'" says Nathan Fillion, who plays *Serenity*'s captain, Mal. "It's the same problems people have always dealt with." The same can be said back on our home planet, where Whedon reworked the *Firefly* pilot, eliminating some gravitas and increasing the action, after Fox bristled at an early cut. Despite all the flashy sci-fi trappings, he stresses that the show is about human interaction and that spaceships, like vampires, are just a means for exploring relationships. "(The scale of the show) hasn't really hit me yet, in the way it did some of my friends," he says. "We'll walk through the set, and they'll look at me glazed and say, 'Dude, you have a spaceship.'" JON REGARDIE