

OpenLearn Podcast*Relationships with fictional villains***Prof Zoë Walkington and Ben Wood:**

BEN: Hello and welcome to the second podcast from OpenLearn, a new series in which we are talking to academics at the Open University about the courses and the content they've got on OpenLearn.

We are delighted to welcome today, Zoë Walkington, is a professor of psychology. We've got some absolutely fantastic content on OpenLearn. So welcome, Zoe.

ZOE: Thanks very much for inviting me.

BEN: No problem at all. Now you've got two courses on the website. What Happens to us when we Read? and Introducing the Psychology of Fictional Villains. So, the first thing we're going to talk about the second course is going to be our focus today, the fictional villains. But firstly, I just want to ask you an opening question, which might be a big one really, because it's the title of one of your courses. But what does happen to us when we read?

ZOE: Yeah, well, I'm interested in the sort of psychology of what happens to us when we read. The way I got interested in this was I was quite fascinated by finding some research that suggests that kind of by reading about people, it can reduce prejudice, for example. And so, I was really interested in this because at the time I was doing a lot of work with training police officers. So, I was trying to train detectives how best to interview suspects of serious crimes. And obviously one of the issues that you face is trying to get people to be kind of more empathic and understanding of other people's positions.

So, I got really interested in the way that kind of reading books, for example, can help improve our empathy towards other people and our understanding of them. But there's a number of sorts of psychological processes that seem to be happening. So, we're all familiar with that experience of kind of reading a book. And you might read a book, and you might start it and you might think, oh, I can't get into this, know, three or four pages down, you're already getting distracted by your phone or whatever.

Or you might have the experience of reading a book where literally it's almost like a vortex that kind of draws you into that world. And that's a kind of psychological phenomenon known as transportation. And you can see why it's got that name, because it's that sense that mentally we've travelled into the world of the book.

And it's this kind of these processes like transportation when we kind of mentally and in an immersionally are occupying the space of the book almost to the point where we're oblivious in what what's happening in the room or on the train or wherever it is that we're reading the book. So, there's processes like that, there's processes like transportation but there's also some quite interesting processes about how we relate to the characters that we read about so whether or not we kind of particularly identify with certain characters is something else that I'm interested in.

So, there's all these sorts of ways in which we get drawn into the world of a story that kind of either do or don't happen, depending on what you're reading and how you relate to what you're reading.

BEN: So, the villainous side of that, I guess that's one of the tools. It's the tools that writers employ to create these fictional villains that you've also looked at. Why villains more so? Why fictional villains and not fictional heroes that you focused on?

ZOE: Yeah, well that kind of all stems from what I was saying initially about kind of how previously, you know, working with suspects of crimes. I suppose what I originally, I did a piece of small piece of research where I looked at whether or not we could improve people's empathy towards people who weren't positive role models. Because you can understand that when you read a book and you read about a really positive character, you can understand why your kind of might really identify with that person. You might form a strong link with them. You might feel a little bit like you are that character, but what about when they're not a role model, when they're the exact opposite of a role model and what happens then?

So, I kind of got interested in if you like, bad people specifically because it was a little bit harder, a bit more counterintuitive to explain psychologically the relationship that we might form with someone who is kind of, if you like, villainous or bad. So, in my research, I found that people did gain an empathic response if they had this process of transportation into the text. So, if they felt like they were in the story world, it did make them then more empathic to other offenders if they'd read a fictional account about an offender.

So, the key thing was how drawn in they were. in the first place that really kind of mediated the effect of empathy and that sort of I mean the original research that I did wasn't about a kind of someone who was a villain it was about someone who was just an offender but through that I then got more and more interested about well reading about how people relate to out and out kind of villainous characters and so you know that's really where that interest came from yeah and I think people... We enjoy villains, don't we? We quite often, they're interesting to us because they're normally quite complicated and they're doing things that we wouldn't normally do or feel safe doing.

So, they're offering us a kind of opportunity to explore something perhaps that, wouldn't want to hang out with you in real life, but I quite like hanging out with you in the pages of the book.

BEN: I think you quite often find uh actors and people in TV shows when they've been cast as the bad guy, evil character and they do always say they're just such good fun to play. I guess probably in the world of fiction and literature I guess that's maybe the same. Is it think more fun for authors to write these villainous characters?

ZOE: Yeah, I mean, there are psychologists out there who've pointed out that kind of in our real relationships, we part of the reasons why we are socially attracted to someone is because they offer new experiences. They offer things that we don't already know about. And there's sort of research that suggests that we almost kind of gain something from that difference and so, really in our relationship with fictional characters who might offer us experiences that we can't or don't want to have in real life that they also kind of potentially offer us this this window into another world they offer us novelty and as human beings we kind of we've got this thing, this kind of self-concept, if you like, this way that we view ourselves, that we want to remain positive. So, we all want to hold ourselves in positive regard.

And I think there's a degree to which in real life you would worry that hanging out with a real villain might kind of damage that. But the fictional element of this is kind of a safe space in which we can explore some of those perhaps darker sides to someone's personality. From the comfort of your own surf, you're perfectly safe, but ah you can still have those explorations. Yeah.

And you can, you know, I think the word that you use was play, which is probably quite a quite a good word. It's like a holiday from yourself. It's quite tiring to maintain this positive self-concept all the time. And so, this gives you bit of a break.

BEN: That little bit of our lives, the bit that we may think, it would be quite fun to be a bit evil sometimes, it's filling that void for us that we can do that through fiction and I guess there's enough going on in our brain that it gives us that fix that we need. It sorts of scratches that villainous itch for us.

ZOE: Yeah, absolutely, yeah, I think so.

BEN: So, that basis, it stands that people who read fiction and find themselves sympathising, empathising with the villainous character, does that cross over into real life? Do we find that they are also more sympathetic and show more empathy to real life villains?

ZOE: Yeah, it's an interesting question and I don't think anyone's done that research study yet then where you could do a big survey of people who read a lot of crime fiction and then some sort of tests of empathy towards offenders and find out whether or not kind of a... Uh know, survey level, if you like, people's empathy improves. And I don't know of research that's done that. But it's a really interesting idea, one that I'll be writing down for later.

But I think at a more local level, you know, certainly the research that I've done suggests that, reading about an offender in one particular instance can then make you more empathic, albeit I did test it soon after they did the reading so you know that there's nobody that's done that big study yet but I do think it's a really interesting question and I think it could be something that that could be investigated people have certainly looked at kind of fan sites for people who particularly there's all these fan sites. People who particularly like a villain, you know, can go on and kind of talk about them some more and find out more about them and you know people get really dedicated to these characters and you know, and I think that in itself is pretty interesting.

BEN: One of the characters that I'm interested to ask you about is Dracula. Dracula is a romanticised villain. No doubt he's a villain but he's very much romanticising. People do fantasise about being bitten by a vampire, becoming a vampire. People don't tend to fantasise about having their throats slit by a horrible, villainous, murderous character. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What is it that makes a character like that romanticised? or that has that sort of following compared to sheer terror which perhaps is what we should be feeling from them.

ZOE: Yeah, I mean Dracula's an interesting one isn't it and I'm now regretting wearing black and looking a bit pale today. But I mean it's a really interesting one that the vampire thing is super interesting because it's part of what got me into this whole thing in the first place was reading this amazing research paper which was done by some psychologists I think definitely overseas. And they got people to read chapters of either Harry Potter, so about wizards, or Twilight, so about vampires. And they asked people a series of questions to see the degree to which they assimilated some of the characteristics of vampires or wizards themselves.

So they asked them questions, in amongst a whole load of other questions so it wasn't obvious what the purpose of the study was such as compared to the average population how long do you think your teeth are, how high do you think you can jump and for the wizards they asked them things like do you think it's how likely are you to be able to move something just using the power of your mind and they interestingly found that people did assimilate the characteristics of the population they just read about and they related this. So, people who read about wizards did believe that they had longer teeth.

And what's interesting about that is that apart from being quite a fun study, they found that it was fulfilling people's need to belong. So, there's this idea that by sort of forming a relationship with a group, i.e. vampires, it kind of fulfilled some of our belongingness needs. And this is the sort of thing that potentially I think in the world we now live in could become more and more important because people aren't necessarily getting the social contact that they used to get quite so much, know, more of us working from home and all the rest of it. So how are we getting that social connectedness need met?

And possibly it is through our relationships with groups or what a psychologist would call a para-relationship, so that's P-A-R-A, which is a of a parasocial relationship.

uh It's like a one-sided relationship that we might have with a fictional character, we might have it with a celebrity. So, the idea is, you know, I might have a parasocial relationship with uh a particular celebrity. They don't know who I am, but I'm still getting something from that

relationship. And it might sound a bit sort of sinister and stalkerish, but it's not. And there's a lot of I can be, but there's a lot of research that suggests we actually get a lot from these kinds of one-sided relationships with people who aren't even real necessarily. I mean, celebrities are real, what I mean is fictional characters aren't.

BEN: Does it stand then maybe that series of books, if there is a long running series of books where you can really buy into a character that's there for stories, does that naturally build this stronger bond, a stronger relationship that you then take into the real world? You develop this bigger parasocial relationship rather than a I loved that story, but it was a one-off. If you can stick with someone over a lifetime, years of their storyline, is that much stronger?

ZOE: Exactly. I mean, exactly that. think one of the things where parasocial relationships can really work for authors, because if we form a relationship with a particular detective or a particular villain that is repeated through a series of books, we want more and we all get that feeling, we? When we finish watching a particular box set or finished a book, this sense that you actually miss the character. It's a real sense of loss, know, I want it to hang out with those guys a little bit longer and it's the last one in the series and I can't do it anymore.

And, you know, that is exactly where a sort of parasocial relationship can become really quite strong. And certainly, in the course that we did for OpenLearn where we worked with some crime authors from Scotland, including Sir Ian Rankin. One of the things he actually mentions in the course is that people are a lot more concerned about some of his characters than they are about him. It's kind of like they'll stop him in the street and ask him how the characters are and please keep reading these characters but they're much less worried about whether or not he's well or unwell which I think he finds quite amusing but yeah shows how real they're becoming our heads.

BEN: Yeah, yeah, mean, so the world of fiction, so crossing over into our everyday lives, it's sort of giving us something that we perhaps need in terms of relationships. It's perhaps, let's say, that villainous itch that is stopping us from going out and perhaps doing the things that we shouldn't do because we're playing them out in this other world.

Now I'm going to ask you one final question, and you must have known this one was going to be coming up. So, your own favourite villains, you've studied the psychology of villains, who is the best, who are the best villains in fiction?

ZOE: Uh Mine's a little bit esoteric, but mine is from a uh book by Wilkie Collins, who was an author, I think I'm right in saying in kind of Victorian times. So, his books used to come out in a serial format. So, they used to come out, you know, regularly, not as an entire book. And he had this brilliant Italian count called Count Fosco. In The Woman in White which is a great sort of mystery thriller novel and he's absolutely fantastic because he's incredibly charming but to the extent that at first you're not 100% sure if he exactly is a villain but you know he is the ultimate villain of the piece and

he's got so many positive characteristics like animals really like him. He really loves animals, he's quite cultured and he's incredibly likeable and I think that's for me why he's the perfect villain because he's someone that you love and hate at the same time and there's a lot of research actually that's been done into which villains are quite effective for us and it's a lot about not presenting a one-dimensional thing but having someone for example who is who we are sort of simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by at the same time, the pull and push that you get in villainous characters that makes them work so well.

BEN: Well, anyone who's not read that particular story then that's a recommendation something to go out and try. So I just want to say thank you though that's been absolutely fascinating I could ask you many more questions, but we will maybe save it for another day.

What I will say anyone who's watched this if you've got any questions please do pop them in the chat, we'd also love to know who your own favourite fictional villains are so pop those in the chat as well.

So, there we go, we end with a recommendation there from our expert in fictional villains. And if you want to enrol on Zoe's course, Introducing the Psychology of Our Relationships with Fictional Villains, free on OpenLearn, you can do so via the links below.

And don't forget, give this video a Like, subscribe to the channel and if you want to be notified for all the new content coming out here, don't forget to hit that bell button for your notifications.

And the last thing to say is thank you so much Zoe for your time this morning.

Thank you for joining us. We've got some fantastic things to go away and read more about and thank you for your insights.

ZOE: Thanks Ben. Bye.

BEN: Thanks everyone and join us again soon.