

3.6 Snow White: Grimm Beginnings

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club, and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice, and this week, I'm going to be talking all about everyone's favourite unpaid housekeeper, Snow White.

[theme music fades out]

[ominous orchestral music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Once upon a time, an eighteen-year-old girl went to the cinemas to see *Frozen II* on the day it was released. She sat in the middle row in the centre, with parents to her right and small children to her left. Her eyes grew wide with anticipation and her heart beat faster with excitement as the familiar tune played over the Disney castle logo. As the movie played, she laughed at all the gags and shot disapproving looks at the children in the front row who were talking. And at the end, as the music swelled and she watched Elsa ride into the sunset on her water horse, she bawled like a baby.

[orchestral music fades out]

Angourie [host]

I grew up in the 2000s, the generation that began with the last flat animation Disney Princess movie, *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009. I remember watching *Princess and the Frog* on DVD in my best friend's basement. And at the time, I actually didn't consider it particularly influential. But six years later, I went to New Orleans, where the film is set, and I kept pointing at things and saying: "I remember that from *The Princess and the Frog!*" In 2010, my older cousin took my sister and me to the cinema to see *Tangled*, and it quickly became a favourite of mine. I continue to re-watch that film whenever I'm feeling sad. In 2013, I was twelve years old, in my first year of high school, and on the edge of being "too cool" and "too old" for Disney Princess movies. But, I still went to see *Frozen* in cinemas, and I quietly loved it. In 2016, I was still in my "too cool for kids' movies" phase, and so I didn't watch *Moana* in cinemas. But, I soon succumbed, watched it on iTunes and loved it, and proceeded to listen to *How Far I'll Go* on repeat for six months. And just last year, I went to the cinemas to see *Frozen II* the day it came out.

I also grew up with fairy tales. We have multiple big bind ups of old illustrated Hans Christian Andersen and Grimms' fairy tales from when my mum was a kid. These fairy tale

books were comforting and cosy, and I would read them whenever I felt sad or scared. And, you know, they contained the usual suspects: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Rapunzel*, but also less well-known ones, ranging from *The Snow Queen* – which was the basis for *Frozen* – to the obscure *Golden-hairs and Golden-stars* – which was always one of my favourites, but it's so obscure I actually can't find it anywhere online. The book it's featured in says it originates in Lithuania, but no author is credited. Let me know if you've heard of it. Last season I did a podcast episode in which I read *The Little Mermaid* out loud for you. And in that episode, I told an anecdote about the first time my mum read me the original Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, and how shocked I was at the brutal and sad ending, so different from the Disney movie I knew and loved.

So, I grew up loving Disney Princess movies, but I also grew up loving fairy tales and reading. And I was thinking about it, because you know how we love to think about things on this podcast, and I asked myself how Disney's fairy tale retellings have become such an important legacy? Why do we, as audiences, keep going back to the cinema to see these old tales rewritten and reframed? What is it about the pseudo-medieval design, the anthropomorphised side-kicks and the musical numbers that keep us begging for more? And how have these movies changed the original fairy tales to appeal to a modern audience?

Over the next four weeks, I will attempt to answer a few of these questions in my discussion of four fairy tales: their history, adaptations, and of course, corresponding Disney Princesses. In keeping with this theme, the book club pick for this month is *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* by Julie C. Dao. This is an East Asian fantasy reimagining of *Snow White*, and so I thought it would be very fitting for this theme of fairy tales and Disney Princesses. I will be discussing this book on Monday the 31st of August, which is exactly one month away. So, please read along so you can join in on the discussion!

[ominous orchestral music fades in and out]

So, where to begin with Disney and fairy tales? As Maria von Trapp once said, let's start at the very beginning, because it's a very good place to start. *Snow White*.

[orchestral music fades out]

To understand where this all began, we must go back in time to Germany in 1806, when brothers Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm were recruited by their friend Clemens Brentano to help add to his collection of German folk tales. They travelled around Germany, listening to old folk tales, and by 1810, had transcribed several and compiled them into a manuscript. Their friend apparently forgot or abandoned the project, and so the Grimm brothers took over. In 1812, they published *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* – *Children's and Household Tales*, which included *Schneewittchen*, or *Snow White*. Over the years, the collection went through multiple versions and editions, with the Brothers making minor changes up until as late as 1857.

So, the widely accepted version of *Snow White* is the 1857 version, but I want to take you back to the first version, the 1812 one.

[fairy-tale-esque orchestral music fades in]

It begins the way we all remember, with a beautiful Queen sewing by the window. She pricks her finger, and a few drops of blood fall onto the snow. Looking at the white snow, the red blood, and the ebony wood of the window frame, she wishes for a daughter as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony. Though this was later interpreted as skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony, this isn't actually specified in the original tale.

The Queen gives birth to beautiful Snow White, but at this point we are told that the queen is very proud and vain. She has a magic mirror to which she recites: "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The mirror replies "You, fair queen," until Snow White turns seven years old. When the Queen asks the mirror who the fairest in all the land is, she is shocked to hear it say the name of her own daughter: "Snow White".

Consumed with jealousy, the Queen tells her huntsman to lead Snow White into the woods and kill her, bringing her liver and lungs back as proof. The huntsman takes Snow White to the woods, but can't bring himself to kill her. Instead, he tells her to run, and he cuts out the liver and lungs of a nearby boar and takes them to the Queen. The Queen, thinking the job done, cooks the liver and lungs and eats them.

Snow White, meanwhile, discovers a little cottage in the forest. It's impeccably tidy, with the table set for seven. Hungry and tired, she takes a bite from each plate, and sleeps in one of the seven little beds. She is awoken when seven dwarves come home from working in the mines. She tells them of her escape from her evil step-mother, and the dwarves agree to let her stay there, so long as she, and I quote "cooks, sews, makes beds, washes, and knits, and keeps everything clean and orderly."

Meanwhile, the Evil Queen asks the mirror who is the fairest in all the land, and the mirror replies with "Snow White." Realising that the huntsman deceived her and that Snow White still lives, the Queen takes matters into her own hands.

She shows up at the dwarves' cottage when they're out, disguised as a peddler selling bodice laces. She convinces Snow White to let her in and try the bodice laces on. But! She purposefully ties them so tight that Snow White can't breathe, and she drops down dead.

The dwarves return from work and are shocked to see Snow White's unconscious body lying on the ground! They untie the laces, and Snow White comes back to life.

The Evil Queen, after talking her mirror and realising that Snow White still isn't dead, goes to the cottage a second time with a poisoned comb. She convinces Snow White to put the comb in her hair, and poor Snow White once again drops down dead.

Again, the dwarves return home, see her lying on the floor, and revive her by taking the comb out of her hair.

When the Queen realises that Snow White is still not dead, she makes a poisoned apple. One cheek, the green, is completely fine, but the other, the red, is dipped in the deadliest poison.

So she goes to the cottage a third time, but Snow White is on her guard. To win her trust, the disguised Queen cuts off the green cheek and eats it herself. “See? No poison.” Snow White takes a bite of the red cheek, and drops down dead.

The Queen flees, successful. The dwarves come home and realise there’s nothing they can do. Snow White is definitely dead this time. She is so beautiful, they choose to put her in a glass coffin, and keep her in their cottage.

One day, a Prince just happens to be passing through, and he asks for shelter in the dwarves’ cottage. When he sees Snow White there, he is so enamoured with her beauty that he buys the coffin, Snow White and all, from the dwarves, and brings it back to his castle.

The Prince so obsessed with Snow White that he does not let her leave his sight, and so he has a team of servants carry the coffin with him wherever he goes. One day, a servant gets so fed up with all this carrying, that he takes Snow White out of her coffin and hits her on the back in anger. This jolt dislodges the poison apple in her throat, and she comes back to life.

Snow White is overjoyed to be alive and with a Prince, and their wedding is set for the next day. Yes, you read that right – the very next day.

Back in her fortress, the Evil Queen is shocked when her mirror tells her that a new young Queen is fairer than she. The Evil Queen goes to the wedding and sees it is the very same Snow White, alive and well. As punishment for her evil deeds, the Queen is forced to wear red-hot iron shoes, and dance until she drops dead.

The End.

[plucky, happy music with piano fades out]

The biggest difference between the 1812 version and the 1857 version, is that the former is a lot darker and more sinister, mostly owing to the fact that the Evil Queen is Snow White’s biological mother. This makes quite a big difference to how we understand and interpret the story. Fairy tales usually show strong ties to blood family, and promote children listening to their parents, because the adults, after all, know best. But the 1812 version of *Snow White* does the opposite of this. By writing the villain as Snow White’s biological mother, we can read an underlying moral message that parents don’t always know best, that they have human faults and can succumb to sin, just like the rest of us. So, not only does this change make the later version less sinister and more kid-friendly, but it also enforces the message that evil is *other*.

There are a few more little differences in the 1857 version to make the fairy tale more appropriate for children, like the omission of the Queen requesting Snow White’s lungs and liver as proof. Another change is that the servants stumble over a bush while carrying

the coffin through the woods back to the Prince's castle, and that's what revives Snow White. It's a lot less violent than hitting her on the back, but it's still pretty weird.

There's another change that I want to mention here. The 1857 version includes one small but very significant word: "witchcraft". The word does not appear in the 1812 version, but was rather added later to explain how the Evil Queen made the poisoned comb and apple. But I'll talk about it more when we look at the Disney adaptation.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

I want to talk about the women. Of course I do, I always want to talk about the women. *Snow White* is a story about two women: Snow White and her mother, or step-mother, depending on which version you read.

Now, character analysis is kind tricky when you're looking at fairy tales, because these stories aren't about the individual. The characters in fairy tales are archetypes that are easy to understand: orphan girl, charming prince, evil step-mother. They're vehicles for the morals that the story is trying to teach. And they're also blank slates to allow children to substitute themselves in the place of the downtrodden princess, or the heroic prince. The absence of personality traits also allows for the fairy tale to change and adapt with the politics and fashions of the time. These characters are stereotyped yet malleable, and so they're kind of hard to grasp when doing an analysis.

But when it comes to stereotypes and gender, it's never a coincidence, especially when you're talking about folk tales that have developed over hundreds of generations. Let's look at the step-mother character. The step-mothers are almost always evil, which is significant, because this turns the character into a lesson in itself. We can assume that a step-mother is either widowed, divorced, or a spinster. The latter two explanations clearly single her out as a woman who has defied societal conventions. The history of divorce is very complicated, as is the legality of it and the attitudes towards it, but we can generally say that, in Snow White's time, divorce wasn't socially acceptable. And if she were a spinster! Well, that just says it all. If a woman over the age of 25 isn't married, there must be something wrong with her. But even if we look at the first explanation: "widowed". Though it may seem more conservative and acceptable, our Evil Queen has chosen to not spend the rest of her life in mourning for her late husband, but has instead remarried. This clearly marks her out as cold-hearted. Not to be trusted. Dare I say ... evil? The marital status of a woman, or her relation to a man, has frequently determined whether said woman is "good" or "bad". And in fairy tales, we see it taken to the extreme in order to enforce patriarchal norms. Women who aren't happily married are not just suspicious, but also dangerous and evil – hence the name, Evil Queen. And this is contrasted with Snow White, the virginal maiden who marries young and lives happily ever after.

But being old and onto her second marriage isn't the Evil Queen's only vice, oh, no. The thing that makes her really bad, like really, truly evil, is that she succumbed to that fateful sin that has enticed women for an eternity. Vanity! [echo effect on the word "Vanity"]

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

To talk about beauty, women, and vanity, I want to bring in another piece of art that has had just as much of a cultural impact as the fairy tale *Snow White*. I am, of course, talking about One Direction's 2011 break out hit, *What Makes You Beautiful*. This hit single that skyrocketed five teenage Brits into stardom starts out with the worst lyrics to ever begin a love song:

[Liam from One Direction sings "you're insecure"]

But that's beside the point. The chorus is where the real meat. The main hook of the song is: "You don't know you're beautiful / That's what makes you beautiful." This lyric reinforces the idea that young women must be insecure in order to be desirable, and this harks back to the central moral of *Snow White*. The Evil Queen's downfall is that she knows she's beautiful. She's selfish, she's vain. In her paper *Patriarchal Princesses and Wicked Witches*, Marlene Lindberg writes, quote: "Being a selfish woman in a patriarchy is unmaternal and socially unaccepted as it implies that the woman exists primarily for herself rather than in relation to a man as wife, daughter, or mother." End quote. Thus, our Queen becomes Evil. *Snow White* is different, because she doesn't know she is beautiful. She might even be insecure.

[Liam from One Direction sings "you're insecure"]

Her need for a man's approval to be happy makes her desirable, and that's why she's our heroine.

Now, I'm not trying to excuse the Evil Queen's behaviour here and paint her out to be some unsung heroine who's been victimised. She did still try to have her own daughter – or step-daughter – killed, and that's pretty evil. I guess the point I'm trying to make here is that everything that makes her villainous and evil is an extreme version of female nonconformity. Thus, the fairy tale codes women defying the norm as evil.

The ironic thing about vanity in this fairy tale, is that *Snow White* succumbs to it herself. Not once, not twice, but three times. The Evil Queen tries to kill *Snow White* with three different objects: bodice laces, a pretty hair comb, and an apple. All three of these objects are heavy with connotations of vanity. Yes, even the apple. *Snow White* wants to eat it because it's beautiful. Oh, and also, remember what happened in that other story in which a woman was enticed by a snake to eat an apple? Yeah, well, that's a discussion for another time. So, *Snow White*'s downfall is also her vanity. Like most fairy tales, this is a cautionary tale to young girls.

But of course, this is ignoring the ending, and the fact that *Snow White* actually does get her happily ever after. But why? She surrendered to the sin of vanity, good riddance! This is why I think the ending of *Snow White* is so strange; the dashing Prince coming in the nick of time to save her is almost like an afterthought. He just happens to be riding in that part of the woods, and his servants just happen to stumble over a bush and dislodge the poison apple from *Snow White*'s throat? It just – it feels tacked on, like at some point a happy ending was added to make sure that the children would have sweet dreams that night. The thing that

does feel deliberate about the ending, is the fact that the only thing that saves Snow White from her terrible fate of death by vanity, is a man. Ironically, a man who is in love with her for her beauty. Again, we see the toxic patriarchal values that permeate this fairy tale. But it does not stop there! Oh, no!

Notice how, as with many fairy tales, we've got an evil mother figure? It's seldom an evil father. The trope of the evil step-mother not only villainises women who don't conform, but it also enforces the idea that women's worst enemy is other women. And, you know what, this is a very clever trick to keep women oppressed. Promoting girl-hate ensures the stability of the patriarchy, because it tells women we must rely on men to live a happy and fulfilled life.

And of course, to add to the pile, there's the fact that Snow White literally becomes the dwarves' unpaid housekeeper. A critique that is so often talked about, I feel like I have nothing new to say on it. We all know it's bad.

So, like most fairy tales, *Snow White* perpetuates the same old patriarchal values. What with the trope of the evil step-mother, Snow White's inexplicable love of unpaid housework, and the happily ever after with the Prince, it feels old fashioned and outdated. And *Snow White* isn't the only one. Many fairy tales have these same tropes – and worse ones – and yet Disney continues to repackage and retell these stories for the big screen, and audiences still flock to the cinemas. *Beauty and the Beast* has, time and time again, been critiqued for reframing what is essentially Stockholm Syndrome into a love story. And yet! The 2017 live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* grossed 1 billion USD worldwide. And I was one of the loyal Disney movie-goers who paid a full-priced ticket to see it in cinemas.

How did we get here?

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

To understand where this whole Disney fairy tale debacle began, we must go back in time, to the middle of America's worst economic downturn in history: The Great Depression. To talk about this, I enlisted the help of my sister, who recently studied the Great Depression in her history class at school. Over to you, Kalliope.

[jazz-age trumpet music that sounds like it's being played through a vintage radio]

Kalliope [history expert]

Okay, so. The Great Depression describes the state of America's economy in the 10 years following the Wall Street crash in 1929. Putting it very simply, there were 2 main causes of the stock market crash, the first being overproduction. New technology and machinery and production lines meant faster production of goods, which led to a decrease in demand for manual labour. This meant higher unemployment rates, especially in the farming areas. As well as this, so many more goods were being produced but only a small percentage of Americans could afford them.

The second cause of the crash was the popularity of the stock market. The idea of a booming economy was so exciting and everyone wanted to be a part of it. In early 1929, 1 million people owned shares. Ordinary people were buying cheap, high risk shares in the hopes of making a quick buck. Share prices rose out of proportion to their real value because of this. In October of 1929, the experts of the stock market recognised the weakness of the economy and the super high prices, and sold a lot of their shares. Now this made smaller investors followed suit, and begin to panic sell all of their shares.

At the time, America had no social security system, and no welfare or benefits, so the effects of the crash were catastrophic. Any money that had been invested was gone. The working class was the most affected because any savings in the bank had disappeared. Because no one had any money to spend, businesses went under, workers lost their jobs and the cycle continued. By 1933, over 14 million people were unemployed.

Obviously people were sad and desperate. The booming, roaring twenties were gone. Cinema was still being made, and an escape for anyone who could scrape together a few coins to go. Much of the cinema that was produced were stories of hope and happiness, but also showcased the realities of the current climate. Films such as the 1936 *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin was a comedic comment on the social and economic struggles of the 1930s.

[jazz music fades out]

Angourie [host]

Thank you, Kalliope! A plus!

Meanwhile, Walt Disney had been slowly growing his studio. Founded in 1923, the Walt Disney Company gained recognition with the success of its 1928 sound animation cartoon *Steamboat Willie*, featuring Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Walt created *Silly Symphony*, a series of animated musical short films that were produced and released for ten years. The popularity of this series allowed Walt, in 1934, to begin planning his most ambitious project yet: the first ever feature-length animated film. With a budget ten times of that of a single *Silly Symphony* cartoon. In the middle of an economic downturn.

Critics said it couldn't be done! And yet ... it was. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered on the 21st of December, 1937, complete with a note of thanks from Disney himself at the beginning – which remains in the final cut today.

[string orchestral music plays quietly in the background]

[I recite the following quote in fake deep voice and American accent, and the audio has a telephone sound effect over it for dRaMaTiC rEinACTmEnT. I'm an actor, didn't you know?]

Angourie [host] playing Walt Disney

“My sincerest appreciation to the members of my staff whose loyalty and creative endeavor made possible this production. – signed – Walt Disney.”

[string orchestral music fades out]

Angourie [host] back to being herself

Snow White became the highest grossing film of that year, and, when adjusted for inflation, continues to hold the honour of highest grossing animated film of all time.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

So, in preparation for this episode, I of course sat down and watched all eighty-three minutes of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* on Disney+. I thought I had seen it before, but the more I watched, the more I was convinced that I probably never sat all the way through. Or, maybe I had actually seen it, but I just remembered the bits with the pretty ladies in it. I remember Snow White singing into the well, and her running through the forest, and the Evil Queen talking into the mirror in her made-up-transatlantic-British-accent-that-has-become-synonymous-with-Disney-evil. But I had completely forgotten about the long and frequent gag sequences with the dwarves. But, we'll come back to that.

I want to start off the discussion of the film with who I'm sure you've noticed by now is my favourite character: the Evil Queen.

Now, there's another very important element to the Queen that Disney's film capitalised on. ... Witchcraft! [echo effect on the word "witchcraft"] Though it is only mentioned briefly in the 1857 version of the Grimms Brothers' tale, Disney took this idea and ran with it, turning the Evil Queen into a fully-fledged potion-brewing, poison-concocting, incantation-muttering witch. Now, the history of women and witchcraft is something I could do a whole episode on, but, briefly and generally, women have been accused of witchcraft more than men. Again, this isn't a coincidence. In her paper *A Feminist Perspective on the History of Women as Witches*, Maggie Rosen writes, quote:

"Popularised images of witches look something like the Wicked Witch of the West or the beautiful queen that transforms into the haggard old woman from Snow White. Disney did not create these derogatory depictions of women; rather, they have significant meaning dating back centuries. [...] Most of the women who were seen as witches were widows or postmenopausal. [...] These women, in their barren-aged bodies, were undesirable, and they became the archetype. [...] Physical attributions that correspond with age, socioeconomic status, or deviance were used as tools to incriminate women who fit into those categories."

End quote. So, witchcraft, and the witch-hunts that go with it, are a manifestation of the patriarchy, and an attempt to control women. So, it only makes sense that Disney would capitalise on the whole witchcraft thing, because it builds on the values that are promoted in the original fairy tale: nonconforming woman = evil woman.

A slight change to the Evil Queen's storyline is her death. As I'm sure you'll remember from just a few minutes ago when I recounted the story for you, the Evil Queen is forced to put on red-hot iron shoes, and dance until she drops down dead. A very elaborate and creative punishment, if you ask me. But, Disney being Disney did a very Disney thing and sent the Evil Queen tumbling to her death off a cliff. And again, in true Disney fashion, her death was not caused by Snow White, or her Prince, or any of the dwarves. She died through her own foolishness; standing on a precarious rock and trying to dislodge a boulder to trample the

seven dwarves who were hot on her heels. Lightning hits the rock, it crumbles, and she falls, the boulder tipping back and following her.

She is defeated in a very passive way, almost accidentally. A complete coincidence that there should be a storm on that particular night, that the lightning should hit that particular rock while she was standing there in that particular moment. I guess what we've learnt here is that the story of *Snow White* is just a series of happy accidents strung together.

Speaking of coincidences, let's talk about the Prince! Disney seemed to know more about traditional story-structure than the Brothers Grimm, and introduced the Prince at the beginning of the film. Possibly to make it less insta-love when he kisses her at the end, but more likely to establish Snow White's objective. So, within the first five minutes, we learn that the Prince lives just next door. He jumps the fence to croon a song to Snow White, and, can I just say, side note here – he's really camp? Like, he's all dramatically singing to her, looking up at her balcony, in his pantaloons and fucking cape! Yes, he wears a cape. It's ridiculous and I love it.

Anyway, the major difference with the Prince's storyline is the kiss. As I'm sure you'll remember from the Grimms' fairy tale (because it's too ridiculous to forget), Snow White is revived when the servants carrying her coffin stumble over a bush and the apple is dislodged from her throat. It's accidental, it's a ridiculous, and it's a far-fetched means of giving Snow White her happy ending. In Disney's version, however, the only thing that can save Snow from the spell of her death-like sleep, is "Love's First Kiss". Now, this isn't something Disney made up. We see this trope in the Brothers Grimm version of *Sleeping Beauty*, a detail that was also retained in the 1959 Disney adaptation.

The kiss is an important narrative device; it sets up the goal of the film and establishes a visual cue so the audience knows when the conflict has been overcome. But ... it's also an outdated trope, and one of the more overtly outdated elements of Disney's *Snow White*. Kissing someone without their consent – particularly when they're in a state in which they're unable to give consent, like a magic death-like sleep – is bad, and wrong, and assault. But of course, Disney in 1937 romanticised it and turned it into true love.

And this leads me into talking about one of the central themes of this film: hope. As we explored earlier, the original Brothers Grimm story of *Snow White* is a moral tale of the dangers of vanity. A caution to young girls, with the happy accident of a Prince coming along to save her in the end. Disney's film, however, shifts the focus of the story to one of dreams and aspirations.

This is how you write a typical story: the protagonist wants something. The protagonist can't get that thing because of the antagonist – this can be a person, an event, or something more abstract. This creates conflict. The protagonist overcomes the conflict, usually gets what they want, and lives happily ever after. The issue with the Grimms' *Snow White* is that she doesn't really want anything. But, she's not supposed to. As I mentioned earlier, characters in fairy tales are just vehicles for teaching a lesson. So, this had to be changed in order to write an engaging screenplay. And what does Snow White want? A Prince, of course! The antagonist is pretty obvious here, it's the Evil Queen. So, how does Snow White

overcome the hardships? Well, by sitting tight and hoping everything will turn out okay in the end.

I guess my personal gripe with the idea of hope is that it can promote inaction – and, in the case of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and many other Disney Princess movies, it's used to promote inaction in women. You don't need to save yourself if true love will do it for you, and this is the exact ideology that *Snow White* promotes. It's the idea that women need to sit down, shut up, and take all the shit that's thrown at us. This is exactly what poor Snow White does. After having a good cry because her step-mother just tried to have her killed and she spent a night in the woods and she's essentially homeless, Snow White says, and I quote: "I'm so ashamed of the fuss I've made." This echoes something women have been told for centuries; don't make a fuss. Because what happens when women do make a fuss? When they take action to change their situation? Well, it usually results in straying from the norm. And, as the fairy tale of *Snow White* has shown us, if you stray from the norm, you will become the Evil Queen.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

The legacy of Disney Princesses owes all it has to the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. So, how, in the middle of the Great Depression, did this film gross almost 185 million USD? Well, first, we have to look at why Disney chose *Snow White* in the first place. In *Hollywood Cartoons*, Michael J. Barrier writes, quote: "Disney said of *Snow White* and the Seven Dwarfs in 1941 that – quote – 'I picked that story because it was well known and I knew we could do something with seven "screwy" dwarfs.'" End quote. End quote.

Choosing something because it's well-known has not gone out of style. If anything, it's become more and more of a trend. We've seen the Archie Comics turned into a murder mystery with serial killers, cults, and musical numbers. We've seen Jane Austen's work turned into a rom-com featuring a Calvin Klein-clad heroine and great one-liners such as "ugh, as if!" And, since Disney's adaptation, it's happened to *Snow White*, too. We've seen our heroine defeat Charlize Theron in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, we've seen her dance a Bollywood number in *Mirror, Mirror*, and we've seen her join a sorority in the 2007 film *Sydney White* starring Amanda Bynes.

Making a TV show or movie that's based on something else guarantees an established audience, which means it will sell better, which means more money. This is why there are so many film adaptations of books, and why we keep seeing these old stories repackaged and retold. Sure, *Beauty and the Beast* is problematic, but it's recognisable, people have nostalgia for it, and it will sell. And the numbers are proof of that. I'm proof of that, I bought a ticket!

So, recognisability played a role in *Snow White*'s success, and Disney knew that when he chose it. But the second part of his reasoning to choose *Snow White* is another foreshadowing, if you will, of the film's success. As he said, he liked the dwarfs, and he, quote "knew [he] could do something" with that.

As I mentioned before, there were gag sequences with the dwarves scattered throughout the film, each of them lasting about 10 minutes. They were very reminiscent of the screwball cartoons like *Silly Symphony* and *Steamboat Willie* that made Disney successful in the first place. Without the dwarfs, the story of Snow White and the Evil Queen is quite sparse. The film plays more like a series of cartoons strung together with a feeble plot, rather than a cohesive animated feature like the ones we see today: *Frozen* or *Moana*. But, this clearly worked. Disney didn't step too much outside of what he knew he was good at, and also what the public expected from him. In doing so, he struck a perfect balance between the drama of the original fairy tale and the slapstick comedy of the dwarves.

But another reason as to why Disney's *Snow White* was so successful, is the context in which it was created. As we learnt from Kalliope, America was going through a rough time, with businesses collapsing and unemployment rates rising. The American public wanted escape, and that's where showbiz came in.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

Throughout this whole episode, I've been pretty critical of poor *Snow White*. I've also been critical of the idea of hope, suggesting that it promotes inaction, especially in the case of women. But the thing about the 1930s is that it wasn't as simple as taking action to change your situation. Everyone was working hard to get a job, everyone was hustling, trying to make a better life for themselves, but a lot of it was out of their control. And, of course, a person's action and its resulting success depended on their class, race, and gender. During the Great Depression, all some people had was hope. And to see a movie in which a young woman, down on her luck, hopes for the best and then gets her happy ending – well, that was the inspiring content the American public needed. This theme of hopes and dreams coming true would become a trademark of the Disney company. Thirteen years later, Cinderella would sing her famous song *A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes*, and five years after that, Disney Land would open with the slogan: "Where Dreams Come True." But, we'll get to that next week. *Snow White* established the Disney Princess brand as one of dreams that come true and happily-ever-afters, at a time when both of those things were scarce and desperately needed.

The message of hope is a powerful thing. There's a reason why *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the highest grossing film of 1937. And however critical of *Snow White* I might be, I recognise that I'm looking at it from a modern context. And I also recognise my own hypocrisy in my criticism. I still go to the movies to see all the latest Disney films, and I still bought a subscription to Disney+. I think the brand of happily-ever-afters is a big reason why I still watch and love Disney films. Taking off my feminist goggles and my critical thinking cap, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* offers us a little ray of hope – something that was needed in 1937, and something that's needed now.

So, to bring this all back to our current plague-ridden world, I do think hope is a powerful thing to promote. I think I'm wary of resorting to just hope in circumstances like these, because for me, hope comes with the connotation that this thing that we're hoping for is out of our control. But, the outcome of this pandemic actually is somewhat in our control. There are things we can be doing to help this situation, like staying home, washing our

hands, wearing masks, donating blood, or money, or food, and volunteering where it's safe. So, maybe my issue with *Snow White* is my own cynical view on hope. Maybe I need to shift my perspective on what hope is and how I use it. We can do everything in our power to make everything okay, and at the same time, hope that everything will be okay. Hope and action don't have to be mutually exclusive. And, strangely, during this pandemic, I found I've been telling myself something very similar to what Snow White tells herself when she's stranded in the woods. "I'm sure I'll get along somehow. Everything's going to be alright."

[plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening to this episode all about Snow White. I hope you found it interesting, or entertaining, or hopefully both! I had a really fun time researching it, and I used a bunch of great resources to make this episode, so make sure you check out the blog angourieslibrary.wordpress.com for a full list of links. Just a reminder that our book club pick is *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* by Julie C. Dao, which I'll be discussing on the 31st of August. Next week I'll be back with an episode on everyone's favourite dainty-footed maiden, Cinderella, so make sure you tune in for some more Disney Princess shenanigans. Until then, stay safe, wash your hands, and read a good book! Bye.

[theme music fades out]

[Liam from One Direction sings "you're insecure"]