

Hannah: Welcome to A Smarter U, a University of Lynchburg podcast where ideas come together in new ways. I'm your host, Hannah Belayachi, and today we're talking about one of pop culture's favorite bad guys. He's called himself the Clown Prince of Crime, the Harlequin of Hate, in his movie coming out October 4th his name is Arthur Fleck, but you know him better as the Joker. That's right. Batman's arch enemy is getting his own solo film directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix. This film serves as yet another origin story for the Joker. We're joined by two University of Lynchburg professors who have a lot to say about this character. We have communication studies professor and pop culture expert, Dr. Mike Robinson.

Dr. Robinson: Hi, Hannah.

Hannah: And criminology professor Dr. Ken Wagner.

Dr. Wagner: Hi Hannah.

Hannah: And we will be discussing the connection between the villains we watch on our screens and read in comics and real life criminals. First of all, I'd like each of you to tell me what makes you interested in the Joker?

Dr. Wagner: Do you want to take that one first?

Dr. Robinson: Oh yeah, I get that first. Oh my gosh. Well the Joker is quintessentially one of the greatest villains that there has ever been. So, you know, if you're like me and you've grown up reading comics your whole life, 46 years now out of 51 years of reading comics that, big enough on its own. That along with Marvel's Doctor Doom, he's sort of the penultimate bad guy. so in and of itself that's fascinating. His longevity and his enmity to the Batman is, is worth looking at in general.

Dr. Wagner: Yeah, I don't think it's a coincidence that the first motion picture about a superhero bad guy would be about the Joker. I think his popularity among superhero bad guys is kind of unrivaled. I know that I have a test in my house. My wife, who's not as interested in superheroes and comic books as I am —

Hannah: Unfortunate.

Dr. Wagner: And then her parents are even less so interested. And so we say if a character is somebody that her parents would recognize, that I would recognize, she would recognize, and my young daughter would recognize, then they really have achieved true popularity. And the Joker was one of the few characters that I think that her parents and my daughter would know who he is. And he's full of such interesting contrast in the sense that on the one level me and my daughter would know the Joker is kind of this funny clown character- is somebody to laugh at as he tries to steal Batman's car or something of that nature. The Batmobile. On the other hand, a lot of people know that he's treated in the

comics, from day one, he was treated in the comics and still is today, and in many of the more recent movies, with kind of deadly seriousness. He's a very frightening serial killer, the terrorist/psychopath. So he's this wonderful bunch of contrast kind of folded into one. He's somebody that is both horrible and repellent and then he makes a joke and he literally appears as a clown. He's got so much to be interested in and it's no coincidence to me that he's probably the most popular supervillain in American culture.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah. To echo some of that. I remember watching "Batman: The Dark Knight" in 2008 sitting in a theater with my wife and with my daughter. And if you're familiar with the film, you may remember the moment where the Joker does a magic trick. He makes a pencil disappear, right? And He makes it disappear by driving it through some guy's head. And when that happened, the whole theater erupted into laughter, just erupted into laughter at this horrifying, horrifying event. And as I was sitting there laughing, I suddenly remembered, 'Oh, I've got this young kid with me. I better check and see how she did.' And when I turned to look, she's laughing as much as I am and the rest of us. And then I thought, "Oh, that's good. Well, wait, no, it's not!" And that's what's really amazing about him. Cause like you said, from the very moment he has been, the Joker has been hilarious and lethal, and for some reason we love it. And he's been around for 79 years. He appears in "Batman Number One." Batman first appeared in Detective Comics 27. So the next year he got his own comic. So the Joker's been around as long as Robin, he's been around as long as Catwoman, and he has put those years in, right? He's well past the retirement age, but he's put those years in to become this character that we expect to be there. If you do Batman and the Joker doesn't show up eventually, it's kind of like, "What are you doing? Do you know Batman?"

Dr. Wagner: People will ask questions.

Hannah: You did it wrong. And you guys actually wrote a paper together on the Joker. It's titled "Criminals Are A Superstitious and Cowardly Lot: using the Batman's mythos in criminal justice and criminology classes." What drew you guys together to write academic paper on Super Villains of all things?

Dr. Wagner: Well, you know, I think Batman is one of these characters who has a really interesting, what they call "rogues gallery." A rogues gallery are the bad guys who keep perennially showing up. And in criminology, in many social sciences, we deal with a tool of analysis called a typology. It is where people, to better understand a type of criminal or a type of thing, (typologies are used outside of criminology and in a lot of different social sciences), they imagine what we call an ideal type, which is kind of an extreme or idealized version of something which you can then go into the real world and take real world examples of things, stand it up against that ideal type and see how it measures up. So for example, one of the first persons to use typology was a sociologist named Max Weber. He was the person who kind of coined the phrase and the study of bureaucracy. And so he would say a bureaucracy is any organization that has these features. It has them in this extreme. Now, he would point out there was

no actual real organization that would fit the bill 100% of his definition that he used. but the usefulness of his concept was that you could take that ideal type out and you could take our university or another university and you could hold it up against that idea and see how much it measures up. well if you look at Batman's villains, they are these kind of over the top idealized types from the get-go.

Hannah: Very stereotyped.

Dr. Wagner: Somebody like Firefly, like the ultimate arsonist. you know, somebody like Joker might be, you know, the ultimate or you know, uber kind of psychopath. and so we said, "look, these already kind of fit." and one of the things that is a challenge for any college professor is to try to get students to listen to things that might be kind of dry at times. one way we thought to kind of bridge that that gulf there between what's dry and what's interesting is to actually use pop culture that everyone is, or lots of people are, familiar with and more excited about. we started thinking about writing something at the time when movies like "The Dark Knight" were breaking all kinds of records and getting all kinds of critical claim. And we said, well, he's already got these villains that are walking, talking ideal types. what if we thought about writing about how some of these villains could be definitely linked to or associated with specific typologies that are used in the field of criminology? And then maybe from that encourage other professors to think about how they could invoke these villains' names and stories in order to illustrate the types. it might be something that catches people's imagination and interests a little more. That was, I think where we came from.

Dr. Robinson: Oh, definitely. you know, we live in this sort of golden age of superheroes. Superheroes have always been around. A lot of people started with Superman in 1938. But superheroes have always been around, but wow, Hannah has your generation- they really love superheroes. So really a sense about 1992, 1993, "Batman: the Animated Series" came out. There's always been Batman on television. And really since about 2000 with the X-Men movie, the superhero movies had been sort of tearing up the market in films. So that now, you know, we have dozens of superhero movies and, and as a kid who grew up as a comic book fan, I never thought that that could ever possibly happen. So we also were looking at capturing that kind of excitement. We've had a really kind of amazing shift; you know what was once outside the mainstream is in the mainstream.

Dr. Wagner: You could say it dominates the mainstream. I mean, the number one film now is "Avengers: End Game," right, exactly. You looked at the top 10 selling films, you'd find superhero films now almost dominating.

Dr. Robinson: -all over them. And actually back when we first started talking about this stuff "The Dark Knight" was like the number two or number three movie of all time. the, I mean, the other thing what drew us to do this is this is what Ken and I do all the time. So we live in this interesting position of being both academics and fans, which I think is a really neat place to be because you have the academic

interest in figuring out what the meanings are in these properties and why they're excited and why audiences are drawn to them. But you also have the kind of not, not loyalty the way a fan would. I mean, you know, like-

Dr. Wagner: Excitement. Interested.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, we're loyal to it, but we're not loyal to it in the, in the sense that we're going to ignore things, we're loyal to getting it right. and so like a fan, neither one of us can abide something that doesn't fit, you know, it doesn't make sense. We're not going to bend these things. and right now it's a really exciting time to be an academic and a fan and to be taking concepts like this. But honestly, we really had sat down and talked so much that it got to the point where it was like, maybe we should just write something down. We've done a similar thing. We've done some stuff on some CW shows. Oh, where again, we were just talking so much that when this we decided to just, why not write it down? When the call for papers came up, we were able to do it. And it's one of the really exciting things about the sorts of things that we study. Right. popular cultural criminology have a really powerful direct connection to people's lives that we find really fun to share and really fun to explore.

Hannah: Yeah. Like I have to say that was the most interesting- and for one thing like exciting- paper I'd ever read because it was academic and it was teaching me something about the psychology or so to speak of criminals that I see in superhero movies, which is something I never thought I would ever read about in the academic sense. the villains I would be watching growing up, fighting against the superhero that I'm rooting for actually take into account like what makes them who they are. Because I feel like if you're not looking at it from an academic sense, you're just like, oh, they're the bad guy. We're not supposed to be in their favor, but you guys really took that to a whole other level. And I feel like that really encourages students to learn more about criminology and pop culture and your respective fields.

Dr. Robinson: Oh, thank you.

Dr. Wagner: Yeah, it's part of the goal.

Dr. Robinson: It's exciting. I mean, you know, one of the, one of the really neat things about the Joker and one of the amazing things about this character that we were talking about earlier was this idea that he's horrible, but he's also really interesting. I was looking over some material in preparation for this and I was looking at a foreword that Mark Hamill wrote for a book about the Joker. Now, Mark Hamill, you know, we know Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker, but Mark was also the amazing voice of the Joker on "Batman," the animated series, the voice that a lot of people consider to be the definitive voice of the Joker. When I read stuff that the Joker says in the comic, I hear Mark Hamill's voice and he- Mark Hamill said something to the effect of, "Well, the Joker is insane, but he's never boring." And he gets into a place. that's really interesting because of that. you know, here's a guy who I've asked students over the years, you know, when I've

shown these in my, in my intro to film class, "Why do we like this guy?" Well, he, he's funny. He's a free spirit. He does things that ordinary people don't do. You know, and that's true. But then you say, "well, yeah, but he's murdering." Oh, yeah, yeah, you're right. "But that's bad, Dr. Mike." But, you know, it's still this sort of we're always sort of fascinated with figures like this, clowns, comedians, other kinds of types that can get into these spaces and play. You know, the scary thing is about the Joker is that eventually that play leads to murder.

- Dr. Wagner: Yeah, well, he's also- what I think is interesting about the Joker too is, in the genre of superheroes, which is not totally defined by people with amazing powers and abilities, but there's a lot of overlap there. He doesn't really have any powers or abilities that are that extraordinary. He's not super strong and super fast. He's not impervious to bullets. He can't lift cars over his head or shoot webs. Um,
- Dr. Robinson: He's not even really even a good fighter.
- Dr. Wagner: He's not even really a good fighter.
- Dr. Robinson: He lucks out a lot.
- Dr. Wagner: You know, one of the reasons why I think Batman has become so popular is that he is a prominent superhero who in theory we could be, he's a human that has kind of trained himself to be the top human physical specimen that he can be.
- Hannah: If we had a a hundred million dollars...
- Dr. Wagner: ..and time and could travel the world and... form a league of shadows.
- Dr. Robinson: and just fortunate enough to have our millionaire parents killed.
- Hannah: Yeah [laughter].
- Dr. Wagner: But, he is just a person, you know, he's, just, he's just a human after all. and even, but he's easily, he's a very well-skilled human that few of us could probably hope to achieve. But the Joker is not even that he's, like you said, not usually depicted as a very skilled fighter. He's not depicted as super smart. I mean he, but he's just cagey and resourceful and somehow becomes a villain that you know, can hold off somebody like Batman and we aren't sure whether Batman can defeat him or not. And so that's pretty fascinating.
- Dr. Robinson: Every time too. The number of times that these two guys have fought, is probably countless levels. I'm sure somebody somewhere has a web page and it says every time, but you can't just name these things right off the top of your head. I mean, you know, there are dozens of really great fights we could fill two hours just talking about Joker and Batman fights and Joker and Batman contests. And then the Joker has been extrapolated out into other things too. So

for a long time, remember DC used to do a DC comics used to this thing every year it was called the Joker's Vacation. You remember this?

Dr. Wagner: I don't remember.

Dr. Robinson: You don't remember the Joker's Vacation? And he would go and he would show up in somebody else's comics. It started with that, a Burn Superman story. Remember the Burn Superman?

Dr. Wagner: I do remember where Superman faced the Joker.

Dr. Robinson: the Joker just goes to Metropolis and messes around with Superman. And at the very end of it, after Superman defeats him, it's like, "why did you-," somebody says to the Joker "why did you come here?" And he's like, "why not?"

Dr. Wagner: He was bored and didn't pay any interest on it.

Dr. Robinson: So this is, this is a guy who can, can hold up just about everywhere. and that makes him kind of compelling. that makes him kind of interesting. There's also this thing that sometimes gets called the one bad day hypothesis which is a really a part of a lot of Batman's villains and, and is part of really, I think, most really great villains, but it's this notion that Batman's rogues gallery they all have a sort of really terrible day. Um one of my favorite examples is this character from "Batman: The Animated Series" called the Clock King. He's just a guy obsessed with time and clocks. he was an efficiency expert in this telling of the story. He's an efficiency expert who one day is finally convinced to relax and go to the park. And when he relaxed and goes to the park, the wind comes up and blows away all of these papers that he needs to win this court case. And when he goes into court, he finds that the guy that told him to go relax is the guy that was prosecuting him. So all he did- he just had one bad day. and we all have one bad day. but then these characters react to them very

Dr. Wagner: Their bad day pushes them over the edge and they become the villains that we then see.

Dr. Robinson: Right. They, they reacted with it- it's not acceptable. You know, they take it over the top. So we sympathize with them, but then they go too far and the amazing thing about the Joker is that this is a character who has no definitive origin. And sometimes we'll have this aspect of, well, he had a bad day. It, but what we often learn is that he's made the bad day up. One of the things that is exceptionally, I find exceptionally terrifying about the character is that he's totally willing to embrace in origin, do horrible things. And then you find out he's just kind of playing along. There's a, there's a great comic called "Batman: The Killing Joke" from 1988 that's Alan Moore and Brian Boland. And the stuff that the Joker does, and this is pretty horrific. he basically paralyzes Barbara Gordon in an attempt to drive Commissioner Gordon insane by giving him the one bad day. and throughout this whole thing, he tells this very sympathetic

story of a character who you know, he, he was a failed comedian who has a pregnant wife and he's trying to make some money and some bad things happen and his wife dies in a freak accident and he gets caught up in this criminal enterprise and becomes the Joker. And you're reading the story and you're thinking, wow, this is really sad. Until he says, I don't even know if that really happened for, you know, his, his line is "if you're going to have a past, why not have it be multiple choice." That's terrifying. We're seeing some elements of that in the trailers that we've seen for this movie where we're not sure. We know, I've read in places that "Killing Joke" was probably an influence, but I don't know how much they're going to do with it.

Dr. Wagner:

Right. When you see it in "The Dark Knight" too, he tells several different origin stories at different times. You know, at one point he tells the story that is that his wife got caught up because she had gambling debts. Remember? So he said he put the razors in his mouth, you know, he starts all the stories, with "do want to know how I got these scars" and he tells a different version of it throughout which shows that he has a very postmodern, I guess you'd say attitude about truth. It's, you know, whatever set of facts he kind of wants to present. But I think he'll be very interested in about the movie coming out is though it appears to be trying to tell kind of a gritty taxi driver-esque origin story this time- an actual definitive one. Right. So I wonder if it will have that kind of element of you know, a multiple choice pass and it'll probably try to provide some type of definitive origin for him or not. And I think if they do, it probably will be based in some part on the kind of "one bad day" "Killing Joke" thesis.

Dr. Robinson:

I hope they don't give him a straight sympathetic origin. Because I'm very worried about the idea that we should feel sorry for this guy at all. It, it worries me a little bit and it, I think it diminishes his effectiveness as a character. There's, there's a lot to be said to feel sorry for Clock King is one thing. But I think it takes a certain kind of power out of the Joker that that worries me a little bit. I don't want to feel like — some of the trailers for "Joker" have shown him like, "Oh, he's, you know, he's, he's working as a sign guy outside of a shop and some kids steal a sign and then they punch him." You know, and "Oh, here's some alpha stockbroker jerks on the subway who beat him up." And I don't really want that to be the case. I don't want him to be a guy who was just bullied so much that he fought back. I want there to be a sense, and I've read some reviews that suggested this, that he really was horrible from the outset. and I, that is important to me as a fan. Other people may totally disagree, you know.

Dr. Wagner:

Do you think that's because, you know, if you've read a lot of comics, you know that in comic dome, they've reserved some of the most heinous acts in comic history for the Joker. I mean, he has done- at one point, he, there had been, if you read comics, you'll know that there's more than one there's been more than one Robin you know, as they get older they stop being Robin. You get other Robins and one of the Robins in one of the stories is beat to death with a crowbar by the Joker while he's tied up. And those are the kinds of horrible acts. I mean, you know, basically all supervillains and comics are trying to do

something bad, destroy the world, this or that. But it's often very abstract and the acts that Joker has done in comics history though usually are often the most heinous kind of awful things have been reserved for him. And I wonder if that's why you don't want to hear anything sympathetic about him. But you know, if you're a long times comics fan like you are, you probably look and say, I don't want to have any sympathy for this guy. I've seen some of the awful things that this character does.

Hannah: I feel like personally in the movies that I have seen on villains, like my example just because it is one somewhat with the recent times and I grew up with it, is Disney's adaptation of Maleficent. So we grew up with her in the princess stories as being like the whole source of evil. But in the Maleficent movie, she's catered to as some sort of hero in the end. And she say actually saves her life. And I feel like that's kind of the case of what they're trying to do with the Joker; make it somewhat of an anti-hero, make somewhat of Deadpool, but God forbid I merge two worlds of Marvel and DC, my bad. But I just feel like they're trying to make us sympathetic and understanding of the Joker, but at the same time, I feel like that shouldn't diminish his madness or what we've seen in the past couple movies that they've made.

Dr. Robinson: Right. What really worries me- That's a great point, Hannah. What really worries me is that if the Joker is picked on and he becomes this thing, what makes him different from Peter Parker. You know, what makes him different from Spiderman is the difference just Aunt May, you know, Aunt May and Uncle Ben. And maybe that's important. Maybe that's significant. You were mentioning bad guys from the movies. We love bad guys and oftentimes, particularly in Marvel-DC, will do this too, but particularly Marvel- Marvel will spin a villain into an antihero. Probably the most prominent example of which is Loki. So yeah. You know, go back and watch those my son obsessively watches Marvel movies all weekend. If you're, if you're wondering what he does, he obsessively watches Marvel movies all weekend. And we were watching the first Avengers movie the other day and it was kind of like, "Wow. You know, Loki is not really a nice guy here. He's very"

Dr. Wagner: One dimensional, bad guy.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, he's a one-dimensional, straight up, bad guy who later in the series becomes kind of funny and potentially interesting. In the comics, they're flirting with this idea. He's, I was reading, he's got his own comic now and he was asking Tony Stark like, "how can I be an avenger?" You know, like,

Hannah: I feel like that also caters to his character though, because a Loki is the Norse god of mischief and like deception. So, we don't know of the, his intentions are true to be helpful to the avengers or we don't know if it's just a, like a a true change of heart. And I feel like that's something that we don't necessarily see with villains most of the time. Like that's, that might be what they try, what they're trying to do with the Joker. But sometimes it doesn't work if it doesn't fit the character trope. Yeah. So my question for you guys is why the sudden

interest of watching crime and especially like villainous backstories, why do we all of a sudden need to know where the villains come from?

Dr. Wagner:

That's a good question. The answer is that it may not be as sudden of an interest as we might think. I've you think about it, you can go all the way back to Shakespeare and some of his most famous, most interesting, most talked about plays are villain plays. Macbeth is a story of how this fellow came to come to be a villain pretty horrible villain too. Richard the Third is very similar. I'm not sure that it's a more, that much of a recent thing. For whatever reason we've all always been somewhat interested maybe in a kind of twisted fashion in people that do bad things, we will, why do they do it? And my particular take on it is that we want it to be explicable. We need to have some kind of explanation because then we don't have to go through life thinking that the world is just full of amoral forces and things that just happen with no explanation, nobody's been able to make sense of. And so we do know that there is a world with bad people in it. When we watch idealized stories we're going to have to have bad guys, bad characters in it. And I think that instead of thinking that this we live in kind of this postmodern world with, with no moral force behind it. And some people just, you know, go and do bad things for no reason that we can understand it makes us feel better to have people with a good explanation for why they do things. And so I think this is why Joker is such a terrifying figure in some sense because he does lie about his origin and often isn't given a real origin. And so we really would like for him to have one because it's unsettling to think of somebody would do these awful things and not have a good reason, so to speak. If there ever could be a good reason for all the things he does behind it. And so I do think that what we are looking for as far back as Shakespeare now is what happened, what creates these people that do these things. And with Joker we're just as fascinated as we were with why Macbeth or why Richard the Third would do what they did.

Dr. Robinson:

That's what's really fun about collaborating because Ken takes that answer and thinks about it in terms of criminology. To me, the minute you asked that, my first thought was, oh, well everybody has an origin story. Like in popular culture, every superhero and every villain gets an origin story. You have to have an origin story. Almost everybody has one of those. The Joker didn't and really doesn't, he's been largely a blank or a cipher. And maybe that's one of the reasons too that I get nervous because I really don't want him to lose that special quality. I'm not one of those people that feels like we have to know right from the get-go why certain characters behave the way that they behave. And one of the things that I really have always enjoyed about the Joker is that we're not really sure. So you can have the, you can have the 1989 movie suggest that, oh, well he's, he was a gangster who was so sociopathic that this was just sort of a natural step for him. You know, that, that essentially he was Jack Nicholson and then he was more Jack Nicholson. You know, sorry if Jack Nicholson, if you're listening, don't hurt me. but you know, that's a kind of interesting example. You know, we were talking about "The Killing Joke" and the idea that he's tried to make himself feel sympathetic. There's an old comic. The Joker was the first villain to ever get his own comic series back in the 70s, got his own

comic series. And it's really funny to read it because the rules back then were that the villain had to be caught at the end. So he just gets out of jail every month and [inaudible] and in one of those issues, he creates this whole crazy story about being a failed artist. And then he says at the end, no, I just kind of made this up, you know, like, like this was something that I did. I don't want him to lose that very special quality. But the other thing that's interesting, and this was something we touched on a minute ago you were talking about this idea of the Joker killing Jason Todd- beating him to death with a crowbar. He's not technically the one who kills Jason Todd. The audience is a, because that was a very famous vote. They did a 1-900 number. They did a 1-900 number back when 1-900 numbers were just becoming popular. And they wrote that story such that Jason Todd could live or die. And a lot of fans hated Jason and by a very small margin and an unbelievably small margin, enough people voted to say to kill him, probably the writers and the artists.

Dr. Wagner: Oh my goodness.

Dr. Robinson: That's sort of how that happened. So that's kind of interesting too, that, that it's, that it's often about what we want and what we desire. I'm always fascinated by the end of an adventure with the Joker too because the Joker always goes into Arkham Asylum. Right? And Arkham Asylum is just sort of like this revolving door.

Dr. Wagner: Worst security of any institution.

Dr. Robinson: You go in and you come out worse. And it's really kind of terrible. And I always joke like, if Bruce Wayne really wants to do something, he'll just cut a check to fix that place, right? Better security and all these other things. But that's the wild thing too. We want the Joker to come back out. We want him to make it. Towards the end of "Dark Knight" — and it's kind of heartbreaking because you know, by the point you saw it, you knew that Heath Ledger had passed away — but he looks at Batman and he says something to the effect of, "I think we could do this again and again."

Dr. Wagner: "We're destined to do it again and again."

Dr. Robinson: And I thought to myself at that moment, you know, every year I could go watch these two actors, particularly, as good as Ledger was at that part. I could just watch them. Like, if that's every movie, every Batman Movie I see for the rest of the next 10, 20 years, I could do it. So that idea, if he has an origin that I worry that he's curable maybe. And I don't, I don't want him to be cured even though I should. I should be a nice person!

Hannah: I mean, it plays along with that idea that you said about it's about what the audience wants. And even though they killed off Jason Todd, he ended up, he ended up becoming The Red Hood.

Dr. Robinson: Oh yeah.

Hannah: And so it can always drive another story along, even if they do change the story a little bit because once you take away something, you have to add something to replace it. And I feel like that's what they're trying to do with the Joker movie. Finally, consolidate the origin story. Maybe make us feel a little sympathetic or it might be able to hype up the character of the Joker so that the next time we see him if it is the same character it's like, "Oh, we know where he came from. We know what he's tried to do." And then just drag it on, essentially, for decades to come.

Dr. Robinson: Right. Because it will go on for decades to come. Right. Because Batman and the Joker are older than me, older than everybody in this room. And will probably be there long after we're gone. That's a really it's a really salient point.

Hannah: So in your article you mentioned that psychopaths typically have a need for stimulation and possibly earlier behavioral problems and the Joker commits crimes in this very open fashion so that Batman can come and like play this kind of like 'tag you're it' kind of game that we're talking about that goes on forever. So do you think that this is due to the fact that it's a twisted form of validation that he seeks from Batman?

Dr. Wagner: In most of the incarnations, this is definitely part of the dynamic between Joker and Batman. And I guess it's best summed up in the movie, "The Dark Knight" where Batman says, "Why are you trying to kill me," to the Joker. And he says, "Kill you?" He says, "What would I do without you?" He says, "No, you complete me." And I can't think of any more of an affirmation that he's a source of validation further than that, I mean he you know, Mike and I were talking the other day and he mentioned that, you know, almost all the classic Joker stories, Joker goes to do what he wants to do very publicly and needs to let Batman know he wants Batman to be there. I mean, Batman has other villains like The Riddler who will send him a clue. whenever he does a crime, he compulsively has to send Batman a clue. But you get the idea that the Riddler is doing that because he wants to match wits with Batman, he wants to see, he thinks he's the smartest guy in the room. And he wants to see if there's anybody who can give him a challenge. So that's why he sends the clue. The Joker doesn't seem to have any need to make his crimes public to Batman other than just cause he wants Batman's attention.

Dr. Robinson: Right.

Dr. Wagner: And so I do think there's some kind of desire for validation from Batman and that's in a lot of different incarnations.

Dr. Robinson: Oh, it's been there from the very beginning and his very first story- His very first murder he announces on radio. That was 1940 radio. Public radio is 20 years old at that point. Right. And the Joker's right there, and he uses a lot of mass media

and public situations to announce his presence. I love the 1989 Batman movie when the Nicholson Joker comes around in the parade on the parade float and he's just throwing money out,

Dr. Wagner: The parade, the commercials, when he hijacks the stations and he goes from show to show...

Dr. Robinson: Right.

Dr. Wagner: Yeah.

Dr. Robinson: But it's just, it's great. And all these people like come down, like they come downtown and they know they're going to die, but they come downtown to see this guy. I've always theorized that, that in some ways the Joker gets at our insecurity about mass media and big public events: that they excite us, but they also scare us. That power kind of frightens us. But those are really, really fun aspects to the character. There have been a number of instances where the Joker has actively avoided learning who Batman really is. Like he doesn't even seem to.

Dr. Wagner: Spoil the fun.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah. Yeah. Right. He doesn't seem to care that Bruce Wayne is Batman. And even in instances where he seems to know, it doesn't seem to matter very much to him. Recently last year Batman and Catwoman were supposed to get married. And the Joker is the one who really sort of messes it up. And basically the reason that he messes it up, he, he convinces Catwoman of his thinking, which is that if this guy is happy, he's not going to be Batman. And then further for the Joker, I need him to be Batman, so I can't have this. Yeah, I can't have this stop, you know?

Hannah: It's like a kid crying about them marrying the stepmom.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, right! Exactly. Yeah, exactly. So that's really fun about him too. And there's, there's a there's a lot of heroes and villains that are caught in that kind of dynamic. But many of them would be very, very happy. Many villains would be very, very happy. Dr. Doom would be very happy once he finally kills The Fantastic Four. It will make his day. He may not know what to do the next day, but he will sleep a lot easier. Should he accomplish that mission.

Hannah: So in an article written by the Comic Book Resource, the Joker is thought to be the third most disruptive Batman Villain, being beaten only by Ra's al Ghul and Deathstroke. And the reasoning for it is because the Joker has no plans and simply acts. Now, I know we were talking earlier about how whenever he's asked in the comics, like why he does stuff, it's just sort of like, why not? Or he felt like it. So, but do you think that it's true that he really does have no plans or do you think there's a math to his madness?

Dr. Robinson: Can I, can I ask one thing before you answer it really seriously? Deathstroke was number two? What are they-? Who voted on that?

Dr. Wagner: I don't even choose to think of him as a Batman villain.

Dr. Robinson: See, here's where, yeah, here's where we're going to be the fans for a minute. Here's what we're going to be nerds really seriously? I would not put Deathstroke as number two. But um-

Dr. Wagner: Well I think that, you know, with, I think it's best put that Joker has plans because you do see him in whatever incarnation. He's often one, two, three steps ahead of Batman, Commissioner Gordon and everybody else. I mean in "The Dark Knight" there's a really elaborate scene where you finally think that Gordon and Batman and Dent have fooled the Joker where they have Gordon a dress up as one of the drivers of the car that's making the transfer. And then you know, the, the Joker is told to go after him and they provoke him into going after him and they seem to have caught him. But it's all part of his plan so that he can destroy the police headquarters later. He's always a few steps ahead of him, but I think he doesn't have goals. So I do think, I do think that article that you mentioned is on to something in that Ra's al Ghul has plans and a goal. Most of the incarnations of Ra's al Ghul have him as some type of figure who thinks that he needs to separate the wheat from the chaff in humanity. If the, you know, he often, he's kind of depicted as kind of an eco-terrorist who thinks that there's too many people or that the resources are being used too much and that the awful things that he wants to do are, are part of some goal where he actually thinks of himself as the good guy, Ra's al Ghul. So he has plans and he has a goal. And what is at least somewhat kind of a little bit less unsettling about that is you can count on him, you can count on him not doing certain bad things that aren't connected to the goal because he's not doing bad for bad's sake. The Joker I think has plans, but he has no goal. I mean, so, a good example, again, in The Dark Knight, he has this elaborate plan to rob several banks, and then have each person that's a co-conspirator kill the person before them.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, the beautiful opening for the movie, which was, that was the trailer that they sold the movie on basically.

Dr. Wagner: Right. And then he gets all this money from it. And then at one point, just, in a fit of whimsy, burns the money. He just burns it up. Now that to me is the epitome of Joker: plans, but no goal. He doesn't seem to have much of an overall goal other than maybe impressing Batman or convincing Batman that people are like him. And that's kind of a common theme with him too. Cause if you think about it, Batman and Joker both had one bad day. If you go back to the one bad day hypothesis, Batman lost everything that was important to him as a child when his parents are shot down in front of him. But Batman takes one bad day and devotes it to being a hero. Joker takes one bad day and devotes to being this villainous person. And for some reason I think you're right that he needs Batman's validation that he chose right and Batman didn't. It's super

important to him for some reason, but that's the closest to a goal he seems to have.

Dr. Robinson: It's like he's playing his own game. The other great line in "The Dark Knight" is he, he says, "I'm just a dog chasing cars," but he's not. That's the funny thing is he's planned so much stuff out in the movie that he's clearly not acting on whim, but whatever he's up to, it only matters to him. Batman will talk about this a lot. You will always hear lines where it's like, well, "He's got his own twisted goals. it only makes sense to him. He's only doing what he does." and that is kind of true. That poll is kind of interesting to me because there's, maybe, I think there's other villains that I would put way higher than, than Ra's al Ghul or Deathstroke as far as—

Dr. Wagner: Well, as far as the destructiveness was what they were saying.

Dr. Robinson: Well see, I put the Joker on the top.

Dr. Wagner: I mean, because Ra's al Ghul has this international organization behind him and he's kind of, he's kind of got commensurate resources to Batman and so-maybe more so. And so he can do a lot more destruction on a wider scale. And the fact that he plans so well and his schemes are so intricate. I think I can see saying that he's more destructive.

Dr. Robinson: Well he never does though. That's the thing. He never, he, you know what's one horrible thing? He didn't cause that earthquake right? In Gotham city. So it's at, you know, what has he ever gotten away with? Nothing. And you know, if you're going to sit down and say, "Well what's been destroyed," you know, the Joker's got that whole big pile of debris behind him. I love that scene where he blows the hospital up.

Hannah: Oh that's the best.

Dr. Robinson: He's just wandering out.

Hannah: Button doesn't work.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah. There's no reason to do it. He's just doing it.

Hannah: Yeah. I feel like the, that whole ranking thing, just to give you some peace of mind at night.

Dr. Robinson: I want to sleep at night.

Hannah: It's a matter of like your skill and the planning, because Deathstroke is one of the most highly trained assassins. He could do so much damage. He has the potential to do so much damage. same with Ra's al Ghul. He's like DC's counterpart to Thanos. Like, he thinks he's doing good and he's doing it for the

betterment of the people, but he's destructive because it's the most, it's the closest thing to reality that could actually happen. The Joker is just sort of like, he, he is most destructive in the sense that the surroundings of Gotham and everything, buildings do go down. but he's just doing it to essentially push Batman's buttons. He has no goal. But even though he has the plans, it's like a kid doing homework, but he's not really working towards a grade or anything. He's just doing it to do it.

Dr. Robinson: Why isn't he getting credit? There's a "Justice League Unlimited" episode where he tries to kill everybody on earth. Why is he not getting the credit for that? These people are just not giving him his due.

Hannah: Well the movie comes out on October 4th. So when you plan to watch it and do you have any predictions about the movie, about what origin stories they'll use? Content, anything.

Dr. Robinson: Ooh, excuse- well am I going first?

Dr. Wagner: I was going to say you should go first. Cause you always see movies before I do.

Dr. Robinson: I am going to the theater, as soon as I possibly can is when I'm going. I'm not an opening night guy anymore. I don't have that youthful vigor to be down there and go opening night. But I will try to get there opening weekend. I'm always giving Ken a hard time because Ken is... Ken and I, the one way that Ken and I are very different- and there's a lot of ways we're very similar interests- but one way we're very different, his, Ken does not feel this compulsion to be there on opening weekend, the way I do.

Dr. Wagner: I often will wait for it to come out in the like the dollar theater later. But that-

Dr. Robinson: Drives me nuts.

Dr. Wagner: You have to engage in a great deal of Internet avoidance so that it doesn't get spoiled.

Hannah: My dad is the same way, and my little brother's still screaming at him to watch "Endgame".

Dr. Robinson: Yeah. I'll send, I'll send Ken messages and it'll be like, well, "so there's this, have you seen it?" Knowing that he hasn't just, you know, just waiting, but then he'll feel surprise me every now and then and it'll be like, oh, you know, like I went the second week, if he goes the second week, it must really be something.

Dr. Wagner: And I'll probably. That's probably my plan for the Joker is probably about with the second week, I'll try to catch a matinee on a day that I'm off and see.

Dr. Robinson: The hard part with this will be leaving my boy behind. He's too young to see it.

Dr. Wagner: Yeah.

Dr. Robinson: So, yeah, I know from what I've read, it's R-rated. And from what I've read,-

Dr. Wagner: It's one of the few superhero movies that are R-rated, so as Mike said, you know, I've, one of the things I shared with my daughter when she was young was going to see superhero films with her. This will be the instance of one you don't want to do. It's going to be R-rated. And from everything I can see it's based as much on things like "Taxi Driver" and "King of Comedy". I know that Scorsese is one of the producers of the movie.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, he was initially, I don't know if he stayed all the way, but I know he was initially involved.

Dr. Wagner: But I think that Phillips said that he wanted to kind of pay homage to these kind of gritty seventies films about people that are in kind of anomic, confusing urban scenarios where they don't feel appreciated and loved and that kind of, you know, pushes them over the edge. So, I mean, I think it'll be a lot like that. And I wonder how much it will play to traditional comics. What are you thinking?

Dr. Robinson: I think it will have a very different flavor based on just what little I've read. I try to be very careful about spoilers, but I've read a couple of reviews that were fairly spoil free, and what I'm hearing is, is what you're saying that it does have that very seventies sort of "Taxi Driver" feel to it. I think that it's probably going to be brutal. And that's why I can't take the boy. I've gotten him to watch other R-rated movies in the past that weren't particularly brutal like that. And I anticipated, some, some grim brutality. I showed him "A Fistful of Dollars" this summer and he looked at me, he said, "I don't like this guy. Are you sure this is the hero? I don't like this guy. He's kind of mean."

Dr. Wagner: Yeah, he probably wouldn't like Joker then.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah. So he, I mean, he loves the Joker, but I don't think he wants to see that Joker or he's ready to see that Joker yet. So, so there'll be this little tricky negotiation as I try to figure out like how to get there and what to do. But no, I'll be there as fast as I possibly can, cause people, and I mean the, the downside of doing this for a living is people run right up to you. Yes. And they're like, "Dr. Mike, what did you think about this? So and so died!"

Dr. Wagner: You must have seen it.

Dr. Robinson: And it's like, "Well, I haven't seen this movie. So I don't know." So I live in absolute fear that somebody will spoil something for me or that I just can't talk to them about it. I hate to be somewhere and to have somebody walk up to me and, and they're so excited to talk about this thing and it's my thing, and it's my

area, and I can't engage them because I haven't done my homework. You know, I haven't done my due diligence and gone to see the movie.

Hannah: Well, I actually think that it might actually have more of a comedic effect on the film just because Phillips did direct all three "Hangover" movies.

Dr. Robinson: Oh yeah, that's right. Oh yeah. It's hidden comedy. Is that what you're saying?

Hannah: We might not know! Like, now, I'm not saying it's going to be as a comedic as "Deadpool" per se, but surely, because the Joker does take on a clown persona, that maybe it'll play a little bit more to that first and then sort of like his psycho activeness will be like in the background, so to speak. Yeah. Like hi- We will see the destructive actions that does make him the Joker. But I feel like it'll play more to his twisted sense of humor.

Dr. Robinson: Well, I hope so. Yeah. I hope you're absolutely right because, if it doesn't, then what separates him from "Taxi Driver"? What, what would he be? But just another one of those characters.

Dr. Wagner: "Taxi Driver". But in clown makeup.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah.

Dr. Wagner: I mean, to be honest, that's what the trailers that I've seen and they look very interesting to me. But they look a lot like "Taxi Driver" with clown makeup.

Dr. Robinson: We've had a couple of these arguments. So you mentioned "Deadpool." "Logan" was another one.

Dr. Wagner: R-rated. That's right. We have had a handful.

Dr. Robinson: They had been commercially successful. And they've largely been the kinds of films that really re-examine the genre. That's, that's what's really a lot of fun about those. You know, "Deadpool" plays the superhero genre. "Deadpool" is a superhero movie from the beginning to the end. So is "Deadpool 2." But it riffs on that the whole time. It plays with it the whole time. "Logan" is really —

Dr. Wagner: Like reverse the classic Western.

Dr. Robinson: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly. It's the "Unforgiven" of superhero movies. It's here's your tired superhero instead of your tired western hero and run from there. So, you know, I hope they, they do something really interesting, but I'm not, I've got to see it before the boy sees it. It's got go that way.

Dr. Wagner: I think it'd be very performance driven from what I've seen in the trailers and in the reviews. In other words, it'll be largely a good deal of focus on the main

actor, Phoenix's transformation into this character. So I think that's one thing to expect.

- Dr. Robinson: They say he's amazing. I read something the other day that said there's not a special effect in the thing and that a lot of what you are mesmerized by is his performance.
- Dr. Wagner: A lot of people felt that Heath Ledger and "The Dark Knight" in general got snubbed. A lot of people from the comics community, I think in the superhero genre community, thought that there was a real snub of Heath Ledger for his performance and I think they're thinking that can't and shouldn't happen this time, if Phoenix does a really good job with this material.
- Hannah: Alright. To end it all off, I'd like to ask both of you, what's your favorite version of the Joker and why?
- Dr. Robinson: Oh, you're making me go first? Ken just looked at me. You can't see that on audio. Ken just looked at me like, "oh, you're going, yeah, you're going, Mike, you jump in." Oh my gosh. I love everything about "Batman: The Animated Series". I have often said that you will, which is kind of depressing, but I've often said you will never get a better Batman than that. Maybe someday we will. But for pure synthesis of everything, great about Batman, that TV show that was supposed to be a kids cartoon but turns out to be an amazing show for an adult is where I often will go for the best of Batman. And I think that the way they animate the Joker in there and the way that Mark Hamill does that voice is amazing. And within the constraints of kids' TV at the time, you get a character who can be whimsical but can also be ruthlessly dangerous. So outside of comics, that's always been my absolute favorite Joker.
- Dr. Wagner: I can definitely tell you the worst one. And that's, after the animated series, what was the —
- Dr. Robinson: Oh, "The Batman?"
- Dr. Wagner: "The Batman" was an animated show.
- Dr. Robinson: The one that didn't wear shoes.
- Dr. Wagner: They redid him as if he was some cross between The Hulk and Solomon Grundy where Joker was kind of like this you know, muscular, thuggish, you know, shoeless. To me, hands down, the best one is Heath Ledger in "The Dark Knight." I think he just captures the whole idea of Joker as a psychopath. you don't know what he's going to do next. He's deadly and dangerous and yet at the same time you can't take your eyes off of him. So you know, you wanna see what he's going to do next.

Dr. Robinson:

Almost all of them, see, I didn't watch "The Batman," but almost every version of the Joker in anything is a lot of fun. Even Cesar Romero is kind of fun sometimes in the old show. So the right actor really does some amazing stuff with the character. It's true.

Hannah:

Well, that's all the time we have for today. Mike, Ken, thank you for joining the discussion. And to all our listeners, we're glad you came. Is there a Lynchburg professor or alum you'd like to hear on our podcast this season or a topic you'd like us to tackle? Email, ucm@lynchburg.edu to let us know. Until next time.