

3.8 The Little Mermaid: Fish Out of Water with Kali

Angourie [host]

Before we begin, we 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.

[fade in: 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 –

Kali [guest]

And I'm Kali Shanthi, hello!

Angourie [host]

And this week, we're going to be talking all about that fiery red-headed fish, *The Little Mermaid!*

[fade out: theme music]

[fade in: ominous orchestral fairy tale music]

Kali [guest]

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who wanted to sing in front of the whole world. One day, she decided to audition for a national talent competition, with thousands of people watching. But there was one problem: she didn't know what song to sing! She thought long and hard about all of her favourite songs. Maybe something by Miley Cyrus? No, that wouldn't do. What about a song from *High School Musical*? It just wasn't right. Then she remembered her favourite movie about a little mermaid who longed to be human. On the day of the big audition, the little girl stood alone on a big empty stage in front of hundreds of people, and sang about how she longed to be a part of the world above the sea.

[fade out: fairy tale music]

Angourie

When I began this research project and had to choose which Disney Princesses to cover, I knew I had to talk about *The Little Mermaid*. She is one of the most well-loved modern princesses, she's the only red-head, and she's a mermaid, and who doesn't love mermaids? And, when thinking about how to tackle – pun intended – *The Little Mermaid*, I knew I would need some help. I needed to bring in someone who loved *The Little Mermaid* as much as I loved *Frozen*. And I knew just the person.

[fade in and out: ominous orchestral music sound bit to indicate a break]

Kali

Ariel is my bitch. Am I allowed to say that? [laughs]

Angourie

Yeah, you can say that! [laughs]

Kali

I always bring the, um, little explicit warning every time I'm on your podcast! Hello, I'm back!

Angourie

You and I have done Disney karaoke – or Disney sing-alongs – we've played Disney trivial pursuit, which I am ashamed to say, I got very competitive!

Kali

As per usual, Angourie is [a] very competitive board-gamer!

Angourie

Only in board games, not sport! I know I can't win at sport – I'm only competitive in things I know I can win. And, you sang a Disney Princess song – you sang two Disney Princess songs on a talent show when you were young, so I knew you would be the perfect person. You know, what's your history with *The Little Mermaid*, like did you grow up watching her, was she always a favourite?

Kali

Yeah, pretty much. Just my whole life, I was – I am the classic obsessed with mermaids little girl. It must have been one of the first Disney movies I ever watched and properly, properly fell in love with. I had a VHS and would just, like, watch it on repeat, back to back. Like, draw mermaids every day of my life, and would just – I was just, so deeply in that world for so long. That was just, like my whole identity as a child. So, yes I am a fan!

Angourie

Everyone talks about horse girls. Like, we all had a horse girl in our year, but like no one talks about mermaid girls, and there were a lot! I was also a mermaid girl. I wasn't as obsessed with *The Little Mermaid*, but I had, like, a mermaid puzzle book, that was like a book that told a story with puzzles. Obsessed with that. I had this mermaid pop-up book, and I would draw mermaids from that. And I grew up going to the beach and the pool, and obviously, you know, like – would lock your legs together and swim like a mermaid. And I was definitely a mermaid girl – not so much tied to Disney's *Little Mermaid*, though.

Kali

And what a shame that is. But, fine I'll allow it.

Angourie

Before I asked you to be in this episode, had you read the original fairy tale, or heard about it? Like, did you know the original story?

Kali

Yeah, I – So, my mum used to have these old, like, reader’s digest fairy tale bind ups that ... I think they were only, like, from the 80s, but in my mind they were from, like, medieval times. And I was like: “Wow, the ancient scrolls!” So, I used to read, like, the original fairy tales from that when I was small. I remember – I remember reading *The Little Mermaid* one, or my mum read it to me when I was quite small, and I was like: Damn, that’s sad, like I prefer the Disney version, cos that’s better. But I knew that it was, like, a much more devastating story. And then, when you asked me to come on this episode, I listened to a very lovely, ah, audiobook of the original *Little Mermaid* –

Angourie

Oh, my god I forgot! I forgot you did!

Kali

I’m not sure if you guys have heard of this, ah, podcast called The Community Library. But there’s this wonderful host who read an actual mini audiobook of *The Little Mermaid* story. Gorgeous, you should check it out.

Angourie

Thanks for the plug!

Kali

You’re welcome! On your own podcast. But I listened to that. Firstly, you did a great job –

Angourie

Thank you.

Kali

Secondly, phwoar, I bawled. I just, like, bawled throughout the whole thing. It’s, like, so sad! And warm and fuzzy, but in like a devastating way. When did you first read the – the original *Little Mermaid*.

Angourie

Very similar experience. We have multiple, you know, bind-ups of Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales. And so I remember, as well, when I was a kid, my mum read me *Little Mermaid*, I was shocked at the ending. I revisited it for the episode where I read it out loud, and then I revisited it again for this episode. Um, but this time I kind of did more research into the background behind it.

[fade in and out: ominous orchestral music sound bit to indicate a break]

Angourie

Snow White’s first literary appearance dates back to 1812, but she was first a well-known German folk tale that had been passed down for centuries. *Cinderella* has been around for even longer: her story began in ancient Grecian times, before she was popularised in Europe by Charles Perrault in 1697. But *The Little Mermaid* is different. She doesn’t have an origin story that travelled through cultures and continents. She wasn’t crafted over centuries of retellings and adaptations. That’s because she’s completely original.

Between 1835 and 1836, Danish author Hans Christian Andersen published, in three instalments, a collection titled *Fairy Tales Told for Children*. Some of the tales, like *The Princess and the Pea*, were based on stories he had been told as a child. Others, like *Thumbelina*, were based on already established fairy tales or poems. And a few, like *The Little Mermaid*, were completely original. Though his story was partially inspired by both mermaid lore and an 1811 novella called *Undine*, the story of the little mermaid who sells her voice for a chance to walk on land was entirely his own creation. Hans Christian Andersen wrote a new fairy tale. And here's how it goes ...

[fade in: orchestral fairy tale music]

Angourie

Far out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower and as clear as crystal, lives the Sea King and his subjects. The Sea King had six beautiful mermaid daughters, but had been a widower for many years, and so his mother looked after the girls for him.

Of the six princesses, the youngest was the most quiet and curious. She was fascinated with the world above the water, and made her grandmother tell her stories of life on land. As the sisters grew up, each of them was allowed to rise above the surface on their fifteenth birthday. The youngest mermaid waited and watched as every year, one of her sisters came of age and swam to the top, until finally it was her turn.

As she raised her head above the waves, she spotted a large ship setting off fireworks and playing music. The little mermaid swam closer, and observed a celebration on deck. Among the party was a young prince with the most beautiful black eyes. But as she watched him laugh and dance and sing, a dreadful storm approached.

The ship was tossed about on the rocky waves, and suddenly the little mermaid spotted the handsome prince, drowning in the deep! She swam to him and held his head above the water, and brought him to the shore.

By the morning, the storm had ceased, but the ship was gone. Only the prince had been saved, with thanks to the little mermaid. On the beach, the little mermaid kissed his forehead and stroked his hair, but suddenly she heard the sound of bells. A number of young girls headed towards the shore, so the little mermaid dove into the water and hid. She watched as a young girl approach the prince, and he came to. He smiled at the girl on the beach, but did not see the little mermaid in the waves, and did not know that it was she who had saved him.

The little mermaid went back home to the depths of the sea. Thinking of her rescue of the prince, she asked her grandmother what happened after a human being died. Her grandmother told her that, unlike mermaids, humans have immortal souls, which live on forever, even after the human body has turned to dust. The soul then rises up through the clear, pure air, beyond the glittering stars, to unknown and glorious regions in the sky.

The little mermaid asked her grandmother what she might do to obtain an immortal soul, and her grandmother replied: "If a man were to love you so much that all his thoughts and love were fixed upon you, and the priest placed his right hand in yours, and he promised to be true to you, then his soul would glide into your body and you would obtain a share in the future happiness of mankind."

The little mermaid wanted this more than ever, so she went to the sea witch, and asked if she could help her. The sea witch told the little mermaid she could, indeed, give her legs to walk on land, but warned her that the day the prince married another, the little mermaid would turn to sea foam. And it would be painful, too: each step on land would feel as if she were treading upon sharp knives. Furthermore, the sea witch required payment. Her voice. The little mermaid obliged, and so the sea witch brewed her a special potion, and then cut out her tongue.

The little mermaid swam to shore and drank the potion. It seemed as though a two-edged sword went through her delicate body, and she fainted. When she awoke, she found the prince standing over her. He took pity, and brought her back to the palace.

She spent her days with the prince at the palace. He liked her company, for she reminded him of the maiden who had found him on the beach and saved his life. The little mermaid was heart-broken that she could not tell him that it was she who had saved his life.

One day, the prince had to travel to a nearby kingdom to meet a beautiful princess whom his parents desired he marry. He was reluctant to leave the little mermaid, but when he arrived, discovered the princess to be the very same young girl who had discovered him on the shore. They returned to the prince's kingdom, and prepared to marry.

The little mermaid was devastated, knowing his marriage would bring her death. But, she participated in all the wedding activities, singing and dancing aboard the ship, though her heart was breaking. She knew this would be the last evening she could gaze upon the prince. That night, the prince and his bride went to their chamber, and the little mermaid looked out at the sea, waiting for the dawn that would bring her death.

To her surprise, she saw her sisters rise to the surface – but their beautiful long hair was all cut off. Her sisters explained they had struck a deal with the sea witch, so that the little mermaid may not die, and they had given their hair as payment. They gave the little mermaid a knife, and told her that if she plunged the knife into the heart of the prince before sunrise, she would turn back into a mermaid and could return to the sea.

The little mermaid went into the prince's chamber, knife in hand. She saw the fair bride with her head resting on the prince's breast. She saw the rosy dawn grow brighter and brighter. She glanced at the sharp knife, and flung it into the sea. As she dived from the ship, she felt her body turn into cold sea foam.

But she felt as if she were not dying. Instead, she continued to rise higher and higher, out of the foam. "Where am I?" she asked, and a ghostly voice answered: "Among the daughters of the air." They explained that the little mermaid would be able to procure an immortal soul by doing good deeds. After three hundred years, the daughters of the air would float into the kingdom of heaven. Their sentence may be even shorter, for every good child they visit takes one year off. But for every tear shed for a naughty or wicked child, a day is added.

The end.

[fade out: orchestral fairy tale music]

Angourie

Um, so *The Little Mermaid* is really different from other fairy tales. If you will – I wrote this down, cos I wanna say it – she’s a fish out water, if you will!

Kali

Yasss! Queen!

Angourie

Gonna be slipping in as many puns as I can.

Kali

Flipping in?! Is that one? [laughs] I don’t know!

Angourie

[laughs] I love it, I love it! He created a new fairy tale, um – well, how do you think this has an effect on the story? Because, reading it for me, it feels very different to – to *Snow White* and *Cinderella*.

Kali

Yeah, definitely. I guess it’s like, those super old, passed down fairy tales, you can – you can kind of see where the, like, the bits of history, or like the things of the time – the ... what? – customs of the time, like come into it. And you can see how it’s kind of like built up over this long period of time. But with this one, it’s like – even though it’s old for us now – it feels like a fresh story. Like, it – and not, like, pieced together. Before I read it again, I was expecting it to be, like, dry! Quite dry ... I don’t know why. Like the – a lot of those like, old, super old stories are just, like, pretty dusty. And this was just, like, so rich and – just, like, so pretty, the way that the whole world is painted.

Angourie

Yeah, I think cos like, those old stories, the point isn’t character development, it’s not about – it’s not actually about the story, it’s about teaching children something. It’s very, ah, moral focussed, and so the characters are just vehicles to teach this moral. Whereas like, *The Little Mermaid* feels like – like a Shakespearean tragedy. And – and it’s because we feel for the Little Mermaid, and the kind of moral agenda only really comes in at the end, and it still feels tacked on and I ... And I think it’s also a story that – that doesn’t, well, it doesn’t appear to follow the conventions of a fairy tale. *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, they – they’re very passive. They succeeded because they’re kind, and they’re good, and they’re mostly silent. And they’re rewarded with a Prince – they don’t want anything. Um, but the Little Mermaid really is different because she wants something, and she takes her destiny into her own hands to get that thing. And she fails. She doesn’t get a Prince, she doesn’t get a wedding, she doesn’t get a happily ever after. It’s almost kind of like an anti-fairy-tale, because it – it subverts all these conventions that we associate with fairy tales.

Kali

Because it is, like the – one of the only, like, “fairy tales” in quotation marks that we consider, like, as part of, like, the classic fairy tales. Like, that doesn’t have a happily ever after, is it a message ... is that the message? That if women are too driven and too, like, self-determined that they will dissolve into sea foam?

Angourie

It could be! It could be kind of a cautionary tale, because I think it does matter who gets the happy ending and who doesn't. Interesting that, yes, in subverting both of those tropes at the same time, you kind of go back to the same moral of like, women who are silent who get what they want.

Kali

Yeah, double negative. Get it together, Hans Christian!

Angourie

[laughs] I think the reason why I love this fairy tale, and why – why I'm fascinated by it more so than others is because it's about failure. And we so frequently see success stories, but so many of us fail, so many of us know what that feels like, and I think that's why it's so heart-breaking and real, and possibly why, for me, the tale of *The Little Mermaid* has always stuck in my mind as the Hans Christian Andersen version rather than the Disney version.

Kali

It's just – it's also really interesting the whole, like, obviously the whole way that the failure is presented. It's so gracious, there's no jealousy and there's no anger or, you know, like, in a classic cautionary tale, it'd be like: "Oh, you know, the hubris is the downfall of man!" Whatever, like: "You failed because you were rude," or whatever. But there's none of that. It's just like, that's just what happens sometimes: you go for the thing, and you don't get the thing, and you kinda just gotta suck it up.

Angourie

What do you think about the character of the Little Mermaid? I think she's interesting cos, for the first time we see a Princess with motivation.

Kali

Motivation, and ... she's #notlikeothergirls! Once again. [She] sees all of her sisters do different things, and, like, succeed and fail in different ways, and she, like, wants to be different and she has her own desires, and she does different things with her garden. She's quirky!

Angourie

You know, learning more about Hans Christian Andersen's life, he came from a really poor family, no prospects, and kind of just climbed his way up to the top of the social ladder, to the point where he was writing books and he was in successful literary circles in that time. And I think she's a representation of how we all feel, maybe how Hans Christian Andersen felt, is that, you know, sometimes people do feel different and feel like they don't belong in the world that they're in and they want – and they're yearning for something more. And I think that makes her more relatable to me than any of the other Princesses, because her struggle is internal, which I think is so much more powerful. That's a much bigger problem that we all grapple with, because it's not gonna be solved by a material thing like money or success.

Kali

Yeah, totally. And I loved how the story – even though it's, like, you know, she falls in love with the Prince and wants to marry him or whatever – there's actually, in the original story, a much bigger ...

she wants a soul. And that's like, part of her – like you said – her internal identity and it's almost like the Prince is an extra, like, an added bonus. All the other Princesses just have, like, things to happen to them, and like, are in these – like with Cinderella – in these bad situations because of the way people treat them, and it's just like: "Aw, my sisters are mean to me, and I wish I had, like, a better life!" Whereas, like, yeah, the Little Mermaid is dealing with something a bit more complex, and maybe that's why she is such a favourite in the – in ... out of all these fairy tales, is because it's like this universal identity crisis issue that doesn't actually – it doesn't actually involve the Prince at all.

Angourie

Mmm. It can be applied to trying to fit into spaces that – that normally don't accept you. There's been a lot of queer theory surrounding this because Hans Christian Andersen apparently was, like, very much in love with a man, who ended up marrying a woman against Hans Christian Andersen's wishes. Like, he wrote letters to his friend saying: "Please don't marry her, I feel really strongly towards you, like, please don't get married." And he did. And so we see kind of a mirroring in this story, and maybe that's why she doesn't get her happy ending, because it's an allegory for yearning to be in a world that will accept you for who you are, but that didn't happen for him. The man he was in love with married someone else, and that was it.

Kali

Fuck.

Angourie

Isn't that sad?

Kali

That is devastating.

[fade in and out: ominous orchestral music sound bit to indicate a break]

Angourie

An important part of the Little Mermaid's story is that she loses her voice. We all remember that from the Disney movie. But what we might not remember is that, in Andersen's tale, her tongue is actually cut out. There's no going back. And, as the sea witch tells her, quote: "every step you take on land will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives," end quote. So a theme of *The Little Mermaid* is bodies and bodily difference, and this is something I wanted to research further.

In preparation for this episode, I read Amanda Leduc's book *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*. Leduc is an author and disability rights activist with cerebral palsy. *Disfigured* challenges the ableism of fairy tales and how they've shaped our expectations of disability. In her chapter on *The Little Mermaid*, Leduc references another of Andersen's tales, *The Cripple*, about a young boy named Hans who is "weak in the legs" and must lie in bed. At the end of the story, he miraculously regains the use of his legs and springs out of bed, all "cured". Leduc writes, quote:

"The disabled character – quote-unquote – 'overcomes' his disability through some momentous, miraculous act – or, as in the case of the Little Mermaid, overcomes a variety

of disabilities to obtain her heart's true desire through the long work of sacrifice and good deeds."

End quote. Leduc brings this into a modern context, as well, saying that these attitudes towards disability still pervade today. Quote:

"The end goal is always the same: the happy ending somehow always involves a body that does exactly what it's supposed to do all of the time. and if you don't manage to get that body, it's somehow entirely your fault. Society has nothing to do with it."

End quote.

[fade in and out: ominous orchestral music sound bit to indicate a break]

Kali

The way we think about disability and different abilities and different bodies is, like, always about a "cure." And the "cure" to happiness means a quote-unquote "fixed" body, and in this scenario it's an unhappy ending because she doesn't get what she wants, and she still can't speak and she's still in pain.

Angourie

I wanna talk about the sea witch – we'll talk about her next – but I think the sea witch is a very intriguing villain in Andersen's tale, because I would like to argue that she is not the real villain. That the real villain – or the real antagonist of this story is disability, because it's the thing that prevents the Little Mermaid from getting what she wants. Because she can't speak, she can't communicate to the Prince that she was the one who saved him on the beach. Her voicelessness – if that's a word – means she's, like, infantilised. Like, he says he "love[s] her as he would love a little child." Because she's kind of unable to break through this barrier, she doesn't get her happy ending. But the fairy tale never looks at why didn't they make space to communicate with her, why didn't, like, you know? Like, why didn't that happen? And it kind of reframes the fact that she can't speak – the fact that she has changed her form that she can't walk properly, that is what prevents her from getting what she wants.

Kali

Yeah, it's an interesting way to prevent a character from getting what they want. Like, I can't think of any other stories that, like, take away an aspect of the person's, like, physical ability, in like, the hero's journey. But the sea witch, like, knew, even though when the Little Mermaid is thinking about this deal, she's like: "Yeah, I could totally get that guy without a voice, like, that seems doable." But the sea witch, like, knows: nah, that's not gonna happen. It's like, she knew that there's no way for this man to fall in love with you when you don't function like a "normal" human being. Don't you think? Like, do you think that she – the sea witch, like kind of knew that it was doomed from the start?

Angourie

I think that the sea witch ... I don't think she has any personal stakes in whether the Little Mermaid succeeds or not, at least in Andersen's tale. I mean, that's how read it. For some reason, she

seemed so cold and indifferent to me, like she ... It just feels like she doesn't have a motivation to help or hinder her, so she kind of does both.

Kali

Well, I guess, yeah, my interpretation was kind of like, she isn't gonna help her, you know? She kind of wants to put her on the back foot, or something. And she's like: "Well, you know, I can give you what you want, but I'll just take this thing," and in the back of her mind she's like: "But it's gonna fuck you up, though." And the Little Mermaid's like: "Nah, it'll be fine," and then it does fuck her up. But she still took the deal, she still wanted the thing.

Angourie

Yeah, no, and maybe it's also that the sea witch could be exploiting the Little Mermaid's naiveté. And maybe it's showing that, at the beginning, the Little Mermaid has this, kind of hopeful outlook on her life and dreams, and what she wants, and she believes she can get it, and then the sea witch is kind of the opposite of that. This woman who has been an outcast, who has felt the harsh realities of the world, and that hasn't motivated her to help other young girls like herself achieve her dreams, but rather: this is what happened to me, so it's gonna happen to you too, you know?

Kali

Yeah, the world do be like that.

Angourie

[laughs] The issue of the Prince ... it's a tricky one. You know, in previous fairy tales, as you said, it's weird how much of a by-product he is of this situation. It's almost like it's an accident he's there. He's not her chief motivation, but only as a stepping stone to get to what she actually wants.

Kali

What does that say about the Prince? Yes. What does it say about the Prince? I don't know ... Fuck boi vibez.

Angourie

[laughs]

Kali

I can only speak in, like, meme language, it's a problem!

Angourie

[laughs] I love it! It brings in the young kidz viewers.

Kali

Help me, I just dropped out of uni. I need my academic brain back! Yeah, no, I don't know! I – like what is so special? What is so special about him, you know? He kind of, like totally patronises her the whole time, and she's like, so smitten with him. But maybe – actually, maybe she's not that smitten with him. Maybe she really do be using him!

Angourie

Maybe she's smitten with the idea that he can give her what she wants.

Kali

Yeah. So, maybe this whole story isn't actually about her falling in love at all, but just being like: "I really, really want a soul." And then at the end, she's like, too nice of a person to kill the Prince and, like, ruin another woman's happiness. Oh, a feminist icon!

Angourie

And also, I think, talking about souls and going to the air and the spirits, like, it's kinda pretty religious. Another theory as to why she can't kill him is because that is a sin.

Kali

Can we just talk about that end bit? That, like, last paragraph. What the hell? Hans Christian Andersen just did a sneaky acid trip at the end and got real ethereal.

Angourie

The history behind this is that originally, she turned into sea foam. Like, that was the first draft. And then, writing his fairy tales, the first few, when they came out – cos it was, like, serialised – the first few, when they came out, were not received very well by critics. *Little Mermaid* was one of the last ones that came out in his collection, so he was kind of revising and rewriting. And eventually when it came out, he added this paragraph to kind of give it a moral for children. And also give it a silver lining, I guess? In my eyes, it's not a silver lining, because she has to work three hundred years of sacrifice and good deeds in order to get what she wanted in the first place.

Kali

Yeah, and it's like – it's like making her pay for wrongdoing that she didn't even really do. She went for something, and she failed, now she has to, like, pay the price. I don't know, it's a weird, added sentiment that I feel like really doesn't make sense in the – it definitely feels like, like someone was like: "You need to make that like a happy thing at the end, or a teachable moment at the end." Like, it doesn't fit in the story. It's like loose end city, like what –

Angourie

[laughs] Loose end city! I love that!

Kali

Yeah, TM – trademark by me!

[fade in and out: ominous orchestral music sound bit to indicate a break]

Angourie

In the time between *Cinderella's* release in 1950 and *The Little Mermaid's* release in 1989, a lot had happened. The 60s saw the Kennedy assassination, the global pop phenomenon that was The Beatles, and the rise of the civil rights movement. The 70s saw increased anti-war protests, which led to America withdrawing armed forces from Vietnam, and the rise of the second-wave feminist movement. In the 80s, the AIDS epidemic struck, global internet was developed, and, in 1989, the Berlin wall fell, a momentous event that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 90s. America – and the world – had changed a lot in just thirty-nine years. And what about Disney?

Well, following the success of *Cinderella*, Disney began working on a third fairy tale adaptation: *Sleeping Beauty*. They used new animation technology, which was expensive and slow, and as a result, they spent millions of dollars and eight years on the project. Released in 1959, *Sleeping Beauty* received mixed reviews and underperformed at the box office. Disney didn't even break even – they actually *lost* money. So, the company put fairy tale retellings on the backburner for the time being.

In 1966, tragedy struck. Walt Disney himself died. His older brother, Roy, took over, but died just five years later in 1971. The company was then left to three guys who had been trained by Disney and his brother, one of whom was Walt's son-in-law. During the 70s and 80s, the company had some successes with animated features such as *Robin Hood* in '73 and *The Fox and the Hound* in '81. But there were also a few failures, such as *The Black Cauldron* in '85, which cost \$44 million to make, and only grossed \$21 million in the US. Disney desperately needed a smash hit to bring the animation department back from the brink of collapse. In 1984, Michael Eisner from Paramount was brought on as CEO. And, as we learnt last week, what do you need in order to save Disney? A Princess.

[fade in: upbeat 80s synth music]

But how to make Ariel a modern Princess? This was the 80s, post-second-wave-feminism. This was the era of laser-gun-wielding Princess Leia and self-assured, sex-positive pop icon Madonna. This was the era of John Hughes coming-of-age movies such as *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, with rebellious teens who talked about drugs and sex. Of course, Disney had to keep it to a strict G-rating, but they needed to create a Princess who was unlike the three Princesses that had come before her. She needed to be passionate, and driven, with just the tiniest hint of teen angst.

[fade out: upbeat 80s synth music]

Angourie

They had this challenge of creating a Princess that was appealing to a modern audience. Do you think they succeeded?

Kali

I think they did a pretty good job. When I watched *The Little Mermaid* yesterday I was like: "Damn, I can quote this whole movie!" Like, when she's like: "I'm sixteen, dad!" Like, I think, like the way that they kind of did that whole, like, she's not like other girls thing was very clever, because she was adventurous, she wanted to, like, you know, go and explore the shipwreck with Flounder! She didn't just wanna sit in a shell and sing for King Triton's concert! Like, that's – that was boring! I think, yeah, in the scheme of Disney's trajectory, ways to make more money and ways to fit in with the pop culture of the time, they were very clever with the way that they painted her. I think it was so smart to choose *The Little Mermaid* as the movie to bring it – bring it all back. Because they could then explore, like, the whole appeal of the movie, as well, is that it's underwater. Like, [they could] explore this whole new landscape that they'd never touched on before. And the Little Mermaid, the lead character, didn't have to be this, like, super old-fashioned, like ball-gown Princess. She was, like, a freaking mermaid with red hair.

Angourie

They really capitalised on the, um, her motivation, what she wanted. And transitioning into talking about the music, a very important part of this movie, as you know, is the song *Part of That World*. This is deemed as the “I Want” song, and previously, the “I Want” songs in Disney Princess movies had been kind of lacklustre. This was the first movie that had the composer Alan Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman on board. They would work on all those Disney animated movies throughout the 90s: *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*, *Lion King*, like they did all of that music. This was really important because, for the first time, [a] Disney Princess movie was structured like a Broadway musical. *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* had songs, but they weren’t important to the plot. Like, you could take them out and the story would still make sense. And they weren’t very sing-along-able. With a composer from Broadway, they wrote *Part of That World*, and it does a few things. It sets up Ariel’s character, and what she wants, and her motivation, and her passion. But it also kind of brings this epic fantasy-musical-theatre-Broadway vibe to the movie that hadn’t been used before.

Kali

It sets up Ariel’s character, like you said, the whole motivation, the whole reason that she wants to ... she wants something more, she wants to be part of the human world, before the Prince is even in the picture. Like, there’s nothing to do with a dude yet. Literally the scene after *Part of That World* is where she sees him for the first time. So, it already tells you all of, like, the – you know, collecting all the human objects, and then this amazing song, is like, this is her character, this is who – this is what she wants, regardless of a love story. And that is the rebellion. The rebellion isn’t that she’s fallen in love with a forbidden man. Yet. I mean, it becomes that, later, but like, the rebellion to begin with is that she knows what she wants and it’s not what she has.

Angourie

Can we talk about Ursula and *Poor Unfortunate Souls*?

Kali

Oh. My. God. Pat Carroll! I want Pat Carroll to, like, narrate the story of my life.

Angourie

Ursula is ... iconic. She’s iconic. And she’s different, because the three previous Disney villains that we’ve seen have been the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella* and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*. Their design is all – they’re very slender and angular, and they’ve got arched eyebrows, and they – they look like 1930s Hollywood glamour. Like, very beautiful but restrained. Ursula, on the other hand, is large and formidable, and highly sexualised, and camp! She’s camp.

Kali

She’s so camp.

Angourie

She’s got short, white-blonde hair, and like –

Kali

And puts on that, like, massive thing of red lipstick, and like, lounges around with her boobies everywhere.

Angourie

So, her design was based on the drag queen Divine, who was famous in American counterculture in the 70s and 80s. If you look up pictures of Divine, she looks like Ursula. He's got exaggerated eyebrows and lips, and like, sometimes a beauty spot, and her trademark was her spiky, white-blond hair. First of all, let me know your thoughts on Ursula. What do you love about her?

Kali

Oh, my god. She's a legend. And *Poor Unfortunate Souls* is probably one of the best Disney songs ever. She's so hot! She's so hot. Like, she's just fierce, oh my god! And she doesn't give a fuck, and she's got her boss-ass tentacles everywhere, and she's just bouncing around, she's so, like, in her own body. She's like, fucking conniving as hell, like totally lying to Ariel's face but she doesn't know! It's amazing.

Angourie

You know, queer-coding villains is something that – that happens a lot in Disney. In 1989, what are the implications of designing a female Disney villain based on an openly queer public figure? Especially at a time when the AIDS epidemic was a huge thing, and there was a lot of hatred and fear directed towards the queer community.

Kali

Yeah, that, and also ... and also just making the villain a large woman, and that aspect of when she ... when she's trying to, like, spoil Ariel's plan, she turns herself into this slim, conventionally attractive ... like, it's just like, oof. Jesus, Disney. Like, that's a lot. Now, in 2020, we can say Ursula is a queen, and we "stan" her – for lack of a better word. But, yeah, in 1989? That is a lot of dangerous rhetoric that they are loading into that film. A lot of subliminal ... gross things.

Angourie

Because of the identities of who – who is cast as the villain and who is cast as the hero, that's always such a powerful thing. Disney Princesses are always slim, always straight, always able-bodied, mostly white, up until this point, all white. And those traits aren't inherently heroic, um, they don't make a person good or kind or heroic, but Disney codes them as such. Because we don't see any other characters in the Disney canon coded in such a queer way unless they're a villain, it sends the message that these – these kinds of identities are "other", and they're dangerous, and they're scary. And that's – you know, that's a big issue. And in a modern context, as you said, we can look back on her and be like: "Wow, what a queer icon, we love to see it." But a character like her would never be a hero in a Disney film.

Kali

Yeah, it's also just like, pushing that narrative of like, queer people, or like, people who don't conform to the like, gender stereotypes, are inherently bad and will always take advantage of you, and will always try to meddle in your business. When we look at the way that Ursula is portrayed and the way that she gets, like, her villain arc, she takes something valuable away from Ariel, and strikes up, like, this impossible deal and like, robs her and is super vindictive, and ... what does that say about the – the fears that, especially straight men have, like, this fear of gay men taking advantage of them, or objectifying them. Which is hilariously ironic, just by the by. And this fear of, like, overly feminine women, or drag queens being, like, sleazy and slimy, and wanting to take

advantage of people. And it's like a – really, actually, when you think about it – a really nasty way to code the character, when – especially, like you said, in the heat of all of that tension in the gay community. I mean, Disney is pretty gross, though. In a lot of ways.

Angourie

Very much a problematic fave. Ah, we gotta talk about Prince Eric. For the first time we've got a Disney Prince with a bit of personality! He's young, he's a dreamer, he's obsessed with finding the girl who saved him on the beach.

Kali

I actually gotta say, as a general rule of thumb I don't really like Disney Princes, cos you know, I'm a feminist or whatever! [laughs] Ew. Cos, you know, the Disney Princes are usually just, like, so dry. When I watched *The Little Mermaid* yesterday, I only really noticed Prince Eric's character for the first time. Yeah, he has a character, he wants to explore, he's super outgoing, he rejects the Royal family, he's like: "Grimsby, miss me with your bullshit! I wanna explore the oceans and find my soulmate and we'll travel the world together." Which is like, kinda nice. And we see, like, a bit of him before the whole, like, love story thing comes into it. Also, he gets saved by Ariel, which is kinda cool. I mean, that happens obviously in the original story, as well. Which is – just a side note – super cool. She saves the Prince, the Prince doesn't save her! In conclusion: feminism.

Angourie

In conclusion: women.

Kali

Yes!

Angourie

I wanted to talk about the ending with him and how he's enchanted by Ursula, because I think this is a very significant change. Ah, we do have the fact that he gets together with another woman, and there's that threat of marriage – of course, it doesn't happen because Disney – but the other added element to it is that he doesn't fall in love with her, he's actually enchanted. This magical enchantment kind of does two things. It makes Ursula more sinister, she has stakes in the story, now. And secondly, it ensures that Eric remains innocent, because if he were to fall in love with another woman, he wouldn't be that fairy tale Prince, he'd be the bad guy. But, as you pointed out before, the other thing about the enchantment is that it further suggests that the only reason someone wouldn't fall in love with Ariel, is if they were enchanted. And also, the disguise of Ursula shows that no one would fall in love with someone like Ursula unless she changed her appearance, and enchanted them, which is just like, icky.

Kali

Well, it just adds that whole girl v. girl kind of element. They are competition, but also this Vanessa woman immediately seals the deal because she has a voice. She has the singing component, and she just sweeps in and steals her man. And it's, again, back to the original story, like, that wall that she couldn't break through because she didn't have her speaking voice. When I used to watch it as a kid, I don't think I, like necessarily thought about how he's like enchanted by Ursula. I was just like: "Oh, there's another pretty girl, she has Ariel's voice, and she comes and like, takes him." And it's like – like you said, they put the enchantment there so that he's not, like – he can't be

accountable for his actions. Yeah, he also just, like totally falls for her because she has a pretty voice, and she can, like vocalise her want for him, and be like, super sexy and desirable. And Ariel is still just like, the helpless, can't do anything about it, can't say anything about it.

Angourie

Yeah, for sure, and so like, you know transitioning into how this comes back to bodily difference and disability, because here we see a different ending. I do want to – I wanna read out another quote from Amanda Leduc. She says, quote:

“At the end of the Disney version, Ariel has legs, her voice, *and* her prince. The original mermaid, by contrast, dies with none of these things. So, suddenly we have two versions of the tale: one in which the disability is vanished and the abled body reigns supreme, and another in which the disability is permanent and leads to grief and suffering.”

End quote. So, there's no in-between. Leduc points out that the in-between is where she lives, you know, she lives in the scenario in which disability is a fact of her life. Not a burden, or something she has to overcome. Both of these endings that we see to *The Little Mermaid*, like no matter which one you stick onto it, disability is presented as a burden, and happiness can only be achieved in an abled body.

Kali

Interesting that the kiss – the “true love's kiss” that's supposed to fix it all, only happens, or is about to happen after Ariel gets her voice back. So, even though Sebastian set up the most romantic fucking musical number where they are floating on a pond and there's fireflies and it's gorgeous, they don't kiss until Ariel has her voice back, and she can say: “Oh, Eric!”

Angourie

Every episode, I try and come to like a thesis on why people still love this fairy tale today, why it's important in our literary canon. If, through all the murky waters of oppression and terrible messages, can we extract something that is relevant to our lives today? What do you have to say on that?

Kali

Hm. I think so. I mean, it is still my favourite – one of, definitely – my favourite Disney movies of all time, despite all the problems. As we have discovered, there are many. But I think – I think it goes back to that thing that we were talking about, of just, identity and longing for something bigger or different. Feeling like a fish out of water, ha ha. Yeah, that teen angst thing that we all go through, not even just as teenagers, but constantly throughout our lives, I think is just very relevant and very universal. And it has, actually, nothing to do with the love story of the film. And mermaids! Duh, mermaids!

Angourie

It speaks to that sentiment that kids have – I think everyone has, but I think when you're a kid it's particularly strong, cos you – you're thinking about what you want to be. What do you want to be when you grow up? What world do you want to be a part of? And I think that speaks to people, and it asks you the question: what are you striving for? How are you going to get there? And I think maybe it speaks that kind of childlike quality in all of us, because when we get older it's like, well

maybe it's not so much about what I want but what I have to do. I have to do the dishes, I have to do my taxes, but like what do you actually want? What makes you happy? What are you passionate about? So, I think for me, it all comes back to that song, *Part of That World*, and asking yourself: what world do I want to be a part of?

[fade in and out: twinkly piano music soundbite indicate a break]

Angourie

Is there anything you would like to plug? This can be ... I've written here: Instagram, upcoming creative projects or a political agenda.

Kali

Ooh, what's my political agenda? Oh my god. What's happening in the world right now?

Angourie

Uh, pandemic?

Kali

Oh yeah, that old thing. Um ... well, if you'd like you can follow my Instagram @kalishanthi where I post silly pictures of myself and also sometimes rant about things that are happening in the world. So if that interests you, you know, whatever floats your boat, head on over. Ooh! Floats your boat!

Angourie

Oh my god! Another one! Sneaky! I'll have Kali's Instagram linked down below and she'll be tagged in all my posts on my Instagram. I would like to plug ... Oh! I would like to plug the book *Disfigured* by Amanda Leduc. All of the links will be down in the show notes to where you can get the book. Um, it's a quick read. If you are intimidated by non-fiction, this is a great place to start because it's short and also not too academic. She talks a lot about her personal experience and interviews other people in the disabled community, so it's a – it's a fantastic book. That's what I'm plugging.

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

Angourie

Thank you very much for listening to our discussion. As always, links and resources and things that I referenced and drew from will be on the blog angourieslibrary.wordpress.com. Just a reminder that our book club pick for this month is *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* by Julie C. Dao, which I'll be discussing on the 31st of August, so you have just over a week to finish reading it! Next Sunday, I am bringing my sister in and we are going to talk about one of our favourite sister movies of all time: *Frozen*. So, stay tuned for that. Ah, thank you for listening, thanks for hanging out with me Kali!

Kali

As always, it's been a pleasure, thank you for having me!

Angourie

As my resident *Little Mermaid* expert! And I will talk to you next week. Bye!

Kali

Goodbye!

[fade out: plucky theme music]