

Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *The Villain's Journey: Descent and Return in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. McFarland, 2022.

<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/the-villains-journey/>

Valerie Estelle Frankel's *The Villain's Journey* proposes that villains—especially those who are well-developed—often follow a "villain's journey." As one might suspect, this path cleaves to "the hero's journey" monomyth which Joseph Campbell popularized.

Campbell argued that the hero's journey typically proceeded through three acts comprised of as many as seventeen separate stages. Briefly, the protagonist in a "hero's journey" myth chooses (or is compelled) to leave their community in Act I (Departure). The hero endures a variety of trials—which are often directed (or at least facilitated) by divine agents and supernatural events—that lead the hero to develop wisdom and refine their capabilities in Act II (Initiation). Finally, the hero more or less reluctantly returns to their home community in order to integrate their wisdom into their society in Act III (Return).

In her brief introduction, Frankel outlines the core acts of "the villain's journey." The villain's journey begins with an estrangement from their community—usually an *emotional wound* which is frequently paired with a physical scar which—in Act I. Throughout a series of trials the villain generally crosses key thresholds by choosing *self* over *community*—"betrayal and cruelty instead of friendship and heroism" (Frankel 3)—at critical junctures where the villain could choose otherwise in Act II. Contra the final act of the hero's journey, a villain's journey may end either in *defeat* by a hero, *catastrophic consequences* of the villain's own choices, or even by *self-mastery*—when the villain "listens to the tiny voice [of goodness inside] and seizes redemption (Frankel 3).

*The Villain's Journey* is comprised of two parts—"The Journey" and "Archetypes." In her opening to Part I, Frankel contrasts the seventeen stages of the hero's journey which Campbell

outlined against the villain's journey which Frankel proposes. Admittedly few if any villain narratives pass through all seventeen stages, but Frankel's purpose here seems to be to chart general trajectories for the villain as a *type* as opposed to a specific character. Over the course of twenty-two chapters that survey a truly capacious range of pop culture villains, Frankel examines how separate characters live out their journeys and particularly emphasize a given stage. Her subjects include *X-Men's* Magneto, Marvel's Thanos, *Star Trek's* Khan, *A Christmas Carol's* Ebenezer Scrooge, *Harry Potter's* Severus Snape, and *Star Wars'* Darth Vader.

In Part II, Frankel proposes twenty-five archetypes for villains aligned with different stages of life. Once again Frankel draws on a broad range of characters to illustrate her analysis, ranging from children born evil (such as *Harry Potter's* Voldemort) to traitors turned heroes (like Edmund Pevensie from *The Chronicles of Narnia*) to chaotic madmen (such as *The Dark Knight's* version of Two-Face) to evil sages (like Emperor Palpatine/Darth Sidious from *Star Wars*).

One way to test the validity of an idea is to try and falsify it, but this task is extremely difficult with *The Villain's Journey* for two reasons. For instance, Frankel never posits that a villain *must* undergo a villain's journey. (Indeed, her introduction opens with the concession that villains are often underwritten compared to heroic counterparts.) Perhaps in keeping with some of her source scholarship, Frankel instead takes a more general approach to villains as a *type* of character and extrapolates a villain's journey from plot points in diverse character arcs.

Several components of Frankel's analysis are nonetheless persuasive. For example, Frankel plots complex villain's journeys for Magneto, Anakin/Darth Vader, Kylo Ren, *Buffy's* Spike, Ebenezer Scrooge, and Severus Snape, even as their respective chapters primarily emphasize one stage in the journey. And in each of these cases, I find Frankel's analysis plausible. Importantly, though, each of these characters undergoes a moral redemption. I wish that Frankel had spent some

more time explaining why memorable three-dimensional villains usually experience redemption—there are some moments in this book where Frankel seems close to discussing that issue, but she usually defers either to how heroes who live too long eventually turn the other direction (thereby foreclosing an analysis of *why*) or moves the character from the "villain" category over to "anti-hero."

Similarly, in Part II's index of villain archetypes—which frequently reads like proof-texting for the concept rather than using it to investigate the archetypes Frankel describes—I did learn quite a bit about Jungian archetypes and the facility with which we can use archetypes as a theoretical lens for pop culture. I was particularly interested with Frankel's use of Edmund from *The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe* as an archetypical Traitor, where Frankel makes good use of the archetype to interpret how and why Edmund's family dynamics primed him to succumb to the White Witch. Further, Frankel's thoughtful engagement with the Joker as the archetypical Outcast was remarkable. Frankel persuasively synthesizes multiple depictions into one compelling argument for how social norms shape Outcasts-as-villains, and thus how Outcasts-as-villains can (like Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*) function as a mirror for social norms.

As a reader, I found myself quite interested in the character analyses that comprise the overwhelming majority of *The Villain's Journey*. I did not find much occasion to shift my conceptions of any characters, though, but this could be in part because I simply do not have the breadth of exposure to pop culture which Frankel clearly demonstrates. These reflections in some ways signal the general concern I had with the work: it simply tries to do too much at once, without giving adequate attention to the critical scholarship surrounding any of these cinematic, comics, or multimedia universes.

I wish that Frankel had undertaken this work as two volumes instead of one. I would be quite fascinated to see her fully conceive of the villain's journey and similarly establish its limitations as a critical concept. I would similarly read through a thicker catalogue of villain archetypes which delineates where one category ends and another begins, or how we should treat characters who fit into more than one archetype, or where archetypes seem to fail as a framework for lensing.

Given my cautions and concerns articulated above, I think it is necessary to emphasize that I genuinely enjoyed my time reading *The Villain's Journey*. It gave me a chance to explore much more pop culture, and with more critical depth, than if I tried to engage with a subreddit or fandom. At no point did Frankel make me feel stupid or silly for what I did not know, and she demonstrates excellent facility with introducing her readers to the worlds she clearly loves—and the characters who populate them. I can see myself referencing this book in a conversation with friends who are more deeply invested in a given fictional universe—and recommending they read it.

And that seems to be in line with Frankel's purpose with this book. Frankel clearly set out to reach a broad audience. In her own words, her work is "for writers, for Jungians, for philosophers, and for those who are a little bit bad" (Frankel 3). I think that she will succeed in that quest. I do not expect that Frankel will be frequently cited in peer-reviewed scholarship, but I can see this book ending up cited in far more high school and 100- or 200-level research papers than most critics will be. I can imagine *The Villain's Journey* assigned as required reading for a villain writers' workshop or college creative writing course. And I think that Frankel's analyses will provide many aspiring authors with an important challenge: can you craft a villain that makes us wonder where and why they became "the bad guy?" Frankel's work certainly demonstrates that they can, and should.

**Brian D. Breed** is a Lecturer of Writing Studies at the University of Miami, where he teaches First-Year Writing, Writing in the Sciences, and Advanced Writing in the Sciences. His dissertation, *Legal Fictions: The Trope of Criminality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, argues that, through criminalized characters, narrators can compel readers to entertain radical ideas they would otherwise ignore. His current areas of research interest are genre analysis, rhetoric in the sciences, and science fiction studies.