Villains — mask on, mask off

Opinion by **Eshna Das**
Illustration by **Jennifer Lin**

Eshna Das

When I was younger, every Disney show presented a simple idea: there is always a hero and a villain. In "Sleeping Beauty," I learned to despise Maleficent; in "The Lion King," I loathed Scar; and in "101 Dalmatians," I resented Cruella de Vil.

Only years later did I learn that these villains were both misinterpreted and misjudged.

I still remember sitting in the Edwards Cinema in second grade, ready to watch "Maleficent" with my family. As the movie progressed, showing the perspective of Maleficent rather than Aurora, I was certain of one thing: Maleficent was never the villain.

After discovering that her narrative was spun by those who wanted to ostracize her from society, I grew angry knowing that so many – including myself – had misjudged Maleficent. This anger grew after the 2021 release of "Cruella," in which I learned that Cruella de Vil was just a talented fashion designer who never even murdered dalmatians.

With the 2024 release of "Wicked," I also learned that the so-called Wicked Witch of the West was one of the most sympathetic people in Oz. It was society who used her as a scapegoat.

All this rebranding of evil led me to a major question: Can anyone just be a villain?

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Loki is introduced as a villain until the audience discovers his true backstory. In Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," the monster appears as evil until we discover that he is stuck in a body he never wanted to be in. In the sequel to "Alice in Wonderland," "Alice Through the Looking Glass," viewers discover that the Queen of Hearts has been misunderstood – she wants nothing more than to be loved.

I fully believe that if every fictional villain were given a backstory, there would be no villains at all.

It is safe to say that there are real-world villains, and my point is not to defend them. But it is so easy to label people as "good" or "bad," when the reality is that everyone is a mix of both and has a backstory you likely do not know about.

So, I believe it is important to stop characterizing people so concretely and instead go beyond the surface.

If we continued characterizing the Malificents, Cruellas and Lokis of the world as the villains, we would be doing an injustice to both their characters and our principles. So, if we continue judging, mislabeling and resenting people we know, we are doing a disservice to them as well – for we do not know anything about their backstory.
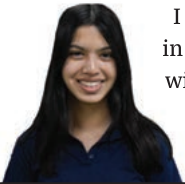
Flaming-Hot opinions with an air of soullessness

Opinion by **Ella Hughes & Dalia Sandberg**
Illustration by **Jennifer Lin**

Gingers are hot-headed. Or witches. Or both.

At any moment, redheads might hop on a rainbow and fly away with their pot of gold.

We have heard it all, from our classmates to random people walking on the street – as soon as they get a glimpse of our bright red hair, they share their favorite stereotype.

In solidarity with our fellow real-life gingers, we are here to set the record straight.

When it comes to redhead representation on TV and in movies, the ones we could think of off the top of our heads were the twin girls from "The Parent Trap," Cheryl from "Riverdale," Daphne from "Scooby-Doo," Merida from "Brave" and the Weasleys from the Harry Potter universe.

Ella Hughes

Growing up, these were our favorite characters because we saw ourselves in them, but it put us into one box: we were quick-tempered, too emotional, sneaky and, allegedly, had no soul.

Merida fits the "fiery" personality, but she is not the prototypically beautiful Disney princess. Cheryl is impulsive, the antagonist to Betty and Veronica, so she stands out from the rest. Ron Weasley is the Ed Sheeran of Hogwarts: emotional, jealous and dorky.

Dalia Sandberg

Hot take: Ariel the Little Mermaid is not a true ginger by popular standards, rocking more of a fake red tint.

The trend of redheads being stigmatized goes back a long time. In ancient Egypt, human sacrifices were offered at the grave of Osiris, and the victims were often red-haired men. During the German witch trials in the 15th century, over 45,000 red-haired women are believed to have been burned alive. It's even in the Bible - Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus to the Romans, is commonly depicted with red hair.

Even Apple made the redhead emoji one of the last of the hair colors to be included.

On Saint Patrick's Day, some communities hold a Ginger Run, but not all Irish people are redheads – and not all redheads are Irish. And while we appreciate some form of representation, and it is fun to be an honorary Irish person for a day, not everyone wants to run.

The fashion world tells us not to wear red or light pink, and our mothers always say that green looks good on us, but you're not helping, mom! In addition, fake tans are frowned upon for redheads (we look like Oompa Loompas), and the more fashionable stores prefer styles for blondes and brunettes.
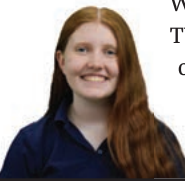
As a redhead, it's easy to consider changing to fit in with the crowd. After all, only 1-2% of the entire world has red hair. All our friends growing up had brown, black or blonde hair. As redheads, we have had moments of weakness when we contemplated whether or not to dye our hair, but we believed the people who told us that others would pay thousands to have our hair color.

You think Emma Stone is a redhead? Nope, dye job. Chappell Roan? Fake. Sophie Turner? Blonde.
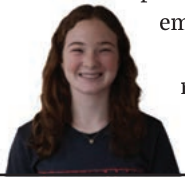
But sometimes, we were jealous of our friends who we saw dying and highlighting their hair and found ourselves wishing to change it more and more. We felt left out, so we absorbed those stereotypes.

It was only when we were older that we truly embraced our inner ginger. Like our blessed hero Sadie Sink says in "Stranger Things," "We make our own rules."

Believe it or not, redheads have souls and real feelings, too. So the next time you think about putting us all in the same category, watch your back. These hot-headed witches will steal your soul and eat it with a bowl of Lucky Charms.