

From Voldemort to Vader, Science Says We Prefer Fictional Villains Who Remind Us of Ourselves

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As people binge watch TV shows and movies during this period of physical distancing, they may find themselves eerily drawn to fictional villains, from Voldemort and Vader to Maleficent and Moriarty. Rather than being seduced by the so-called dark side, the allure of evil characters has a reassuringly scientific explanation.

According to new research published in the journal [Psychological Science](#), people may find fictional villains surprisingly likeable when they share similarities with the viewer or reader.

This attraction to potentially darker versions of ourselves in stories occurs even though we would be repulsed by real-world individuals who have similarly immoral or unstable behaviors. One reason for this shift, the research indicates, is that fiction acts like a cognitive safety net, allowing us to identify with villainous characters without tainting our self-image.

Interview with Rebecca Krause discussing her research on fictional villains who remind us of ourselves.

“Our research suggests that stories and fictional worlds can offer a ‘safe haven’ for comparison to a villainous character that reminds us of ourselves,” said [Rebecca Krause](#), a PhD candidate at [Northwestern University](#) and lead author on the paper. “When people feel protected by the veil of fiction, they may show greater interest in learning about dark and sinister characters who resemble them.”

Academics have long suggested people recoil from others who are in many ways similar to themselves yet possess negative features such as obnoxiousness, instability, and treachery. Antisocial features in someone with otherwise similar qualities, the thinking goes, may be a threat to a person’s image of themselves.

“People want to see themselves in a positive light,” noted Krause. “Finding similarities between oneself and a bad person can be uncomfortable.” In contrast, Krause and her coauthor and advisor Derek Rucker find that putting the bad person in a fictional context can remove that discomfort and even reverse this preference. In essence, this separation from reality attenuates undesirable and uncomfortable feelings.

“When you are no longer uncomfortable with the comparison, there seems to be something alluring and enticing about having similarities with a villain,” explained Rucker.

“For example, people who see themselves as tricky and chaotic may feel especially drawn to the character of The Joker in the Batman movies, while a person who shares Lord Voldemort’s intellect and ambition may feel more drawn to that character in the Harry Potter series,” said Krause.

To test this idea, the researchers analyzed data from the website CharacTour, an online, character-focused entertainment platform that had approximately 232,500 registered users at the time of analysis. One of the site’s features allows users to take a personality quiz and see their similarity to different characters who had been coded as either villainous or not. Villains included characters such as Maleficent, The Joker, and Darth Vader. Nonvillains included Sherlock Holmes, Joey Tribbiani, and Yoda.

The anonymous data from these quizzes allowed the researchers to test whether people were attracted toward or repulsed by similar villains, using nonvillains as a baseline. Not surprisingly, people were drawn to nonvillains as their similarity increased. However, the results further suggested that users were most drawn to villains who share similarities with them.

The researchers believe that similarities to story villains do not threaten the self in the way real-life villains would.

“Given the common finding that people are uncomfortable with and tend to avoid people who are similar to them and bad in some way, the fact that people actually prefer similar villains over dissimilar villains was surprising to us,” noted Rucker. “Honestly, going into the research, we both were aware of the possibility that we might find the opposite.”

The current data do not identify which behaviors or characteristics the participants found attractive. Further research is needed to explore the psychological pull of villains and whether people are drawn toward similar villains in fiction because people look for chances to explore their own personal dark

side.

“Perhaps fiction provides a way to engage with the dark aspects of your personality without making you question whether you are a good person in general,” concluded Krause.

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Psychological Science, the flagship journal of APS, is the leading peer-reviewed journal publishing empirical research spanning the entire spectrum of the science of psychology. For a copy of this article, “Can Bad Be Good? The Attraction of a Darker Self,” and access to other research in *Psychological Science*, contact news@psychologicalscience.org. Krause, R.J., Rucker D.D., (2020) Can bad be good? The attraction of a darker self. *Psychological Science*, <https://doi/10.1177/0956797620909742>

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