

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky and this is part three of our mini-series on sidekicks.**

**Harley Quinn needs no introduction because Harley Quinn can introduce herself.**

*IN: Harley Quinn here!*

*OUT: Say hello to your new, improved Harley Quinn!*

**Harley Quinn is everywhere. At one point, she was in up to 7 different DC comics, outselling many of the major heroes. She's starring in her own movie next year, Birds of Prey – actually the full title of the movie is Birds of Prey and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn. Margot Robbie is playing Harley. And if you go to a ComicCon – any ComicCon anywhere – you will see more Harley cosplayers than any other character. And there are so many version of Harley from spandex to latex to leather.**

***Tell me how do you pronounce your last name.***

NICOLE: Her-view

***Her-view***

NICOLE: Yes like a female's point of view.

***Oh I like that.***

NICOLE: Yes

**Nicole Herviou writes for ComicVerse, and she hosts the podcast Nerd Jersey.**

NICOLE: I've cosplayed played five different versions of Harley in my life, I think. There are so many different looks that you get if you want to go cast play Harley but also so iconic and also not difficult. Like it's so much fun to dress up as Harley and run around behind a make up and you can kind of disappear into her which is so much fun you put on the accent you walk around and you just have a blast.

***I think too about the Harley cosplay is I think any body type works with Harley.***

Definitely!

***In a way that's not necessarily true with male or female you know superheroes.***

NICOLE: I love when I see a male dressed as Harley. I think she would love it like I always talk about her like she is a human being. But I think she would have so much fun with that.

**But it was never a sure thing that Harley Quinn would become an iconic character. She began as a sidekick, and a sidekick to a villain – The Joker -- who abused her and manipulated her. Much of her journey over the last 25 years has been trying to define herself within that relationship and outside of it.**

**The other interesting thing about Harley is that she's the most popular DC character that didn't start in DC comics.**

**She debuted in the fall of 1992 on Batman The Animated Series. I was in college at the time, and I used to literally run out of class and bolt across campus to watch that show when it came on, because I loved it so much.**

**At the time, I was surprised that they gave The Joker a girlfriend. He's usually just pure evil – with no other attachments. But after a while, it felt strange to see The Joker without Harley.**

**She was created by the writer Paul Dini, and the actress Arlene Sorkin. Harley's New York accent was based on a character that Sorkin had done on a soap opera. Bruce Timm designed the costume. It was a black and red Harlequin onesie, with white face paint and a black eye mask. She was supposed to be in just one episode, but she was such a hit; they kept bringing her back. Also, Arlene Sorkin had amazing chemistry with Mark Hamill, who did the voice of The Joker.**

*HARLEY: You were going to come back for me, weren't you pudding?*

*JOKER: Of course, pumpkin pie! It's just that, uh-- here you are! So I can save myself a trip!*

*HARLEY: But what about all our friends Ivy and Two-Face and Hat-Guy and Lizard-Man and Puppet-Head?*

*JOKER: What about them?*

**In a lot of the storylines, Harley is very much The Joker's sidekick, helping him execute his evil schemes, attacking Batman with a giant mallet. But the show also explored their relationship with surprising sophistication. There are times when The Joker leaves her for dead, or he slaps her, or throws her out a window. She'll come close to a breaking point, like in the episode we just heard, she's about to shoot him with a gun, without realizing it's one of the Joker's fake gag guns.**

*HARLEY: Freeze! Clown!*

*BATMAN: Quinn, no!*

*JOKER: You wouldn't dare. You don't have the guts!*

*SFX: Harley cocks the gun.*

*JOKER: (gasps)*

*SFX: Harley clicks the gun. Nothing.*

*JOKER: (sighs)*

**The character's real name is Harleen Quinzel. She started out as The Joker's therapist at Arkham Asylum, until she fell in love with him.**

*HARLEY VO: It soon became clear to me the Joker, so often described as a raving, homicidal madman... was actually a tortured soul crying out for love and acceptance. A lost, injured child trying to make the world laugh at his antics. And there, as always, was the self-righteous Batman. Determined to make life miserable for my angel. ...*

**Lux Alprraum is a journalist who has written about abuse. She's also a survivor of an abusive relationship, and she always found the dynamic between The Joker and Harley to be quite believable.**

LUX: Her origin story is being a person who helps people and I think like her being sucked into chaos is perversely through her wanting to help someone which also really I think speaks to the abuse narrative to that like a lot of people get trapped in abusive relationships because they are natural caretakers and because they're like oh well if I can just put up with this I will help this person. They're only doing this because they're in pain, they're only doing this because this, and if I stick with them I can help them become a better person. So I mean you know she comes to it through this caretaking narrative and then it all gets kind of twisted and complicated and she becomes a villain out of love and she becomes this kind of, I mean she is kind of literally and figuratively cartoon character out of this desire to help this other person who is a villain.

**The animated series was its own self-contained universe, separate from the official DC canon. But there was a lot of demand to bring Harley over to the comics. So in 1999, she starred in her own comic book series. But it was a rocky transition. In the animated show, The Joker is the kind of evil that wouldn't disturb a kid who was watching. But in the comics, The Joker is clearly a psychopathic murderer. So Harley had to become just as evil or twice as crazy.**

**Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner have written Harley comics, and they were not crazy about those early adaptations of her.**

JIMMY: The way people wrote Harley was like this dark mass murdering bloodthirsty animal. There was a story where she like did mass murder. I can't remember where it was but it was like kids playing video games whatever and I just remember reading that and going Yeah that's not...

AMANDA: It just didn't seem like true to the character.

JIMMY: No and especially kids you know because it's like nothing that we don't see that in the character at all.

**Nicole Herviou says early on, a lot of writers took Harley in the opposite direction.**

NICOLE: Whenever someone decides to just focus on her being a punch line or her you know doing just the craziest thing in the world or like oh she's talking in nursery rhymes I'm like what are you doing? I don't think those people take the time to understand her on a deeper level because they just see what surface level and that's it.

**After a few years, Harley faded from the comics. There was a live action TV show called Birds of Prey with Mia Sara playing Harley, but it didn't last a single season. It seemed like Harley would only be remembered for the animated series.**

**And then in 2009, Batman made a big transition to video games, and he brought Harley with her. I've talked about the Arkham video games before. They're gritty and**

**cinematic – nothing like Batman The Animated Series, although they used many of the same voices actors.**

*HARLEY: In case, you ain't figured it out, it's the Joker's birthday! And you're invited!*

*BATMAN: You have one chance to surrender, Quinn!*

*HARLEY: Tempting, Bats, but no dice! Now the inmates have taken over the asylum!*

**In the game Arkham Asylum, Harley's costume got a big makeover that would forever change the character. She wasn't wearing the Harlequinn onesie anymore. Her costume was overtly sexual, with a lot of skin showing. Some fans complained that she had been turned into a sex object, but the costume also implied a more sexual dimension to her relationship with The Joker, making them seem more adult and less cartoonish.**

**She was brought back to the comics with Suicide Squad, which is a band of villains working for the government to take time off their sentences. That version of Harley was so successful, it eventually led to a Suicide Squad movie, with Margot Robbie.**

*HARLEY: Huh? What was that? I should kill everyone and escape? Sorry, the voices!*

**The movie was critically panned, but it made a lot of money, and Margot Robbie's version of Harley was a hit. In fact, I see cosplayers all the time wearing her fishnet stocking, punk rock costume, with a male partner dressed as Jared Leto's version of The Joker.**

**I asked Nicole Herviou:**

***So do you think people romanticize the Harley Joker relationship?***

NICOLE: Yes.

***I mean that's like --***

NICOLE: Yes! They do!

***I won't even finish the sentence. Tell me more.***

NICOLE: Um, I, it's really upsetting. I mean I still I have a hard time understanding it. As someone who has experience in that kind of relationship, and I see it constantly. I saw in suicide squad. Now when that movie came out and like there was still Instagram and Twitter and Facebook posts from. I mean I'm generalizing saying it's mostly young women that but that's what I saw. I think a lot of people do it it's not just younger women but I saw a lot of young women being like girls like guys you can do so much better. And I just keep seeing them respond to Harley and The Joker because there are those little baby moments when he's nice to her and she's so happy. Those little baby moments or what these people who romanticize it cling to.

**As a kid, Nicole always liked Harley as a character, but she didn't see herself in Harley until after Nicole got out of an abusive relationship.**

NICOLE: I'm an Italian Jersey girl. I consider myself very strong. I still do. If you give me crap. I'm going to get it right back. It doesn't matter how tough or strong I am I still found myself in it and had no idea how the hell I got there. And that's because these people are manipulative and they prey upon you and they prey upon kind of your best intentions and they take that in your -- you find yourself. And it doesn't matter how strong you are you can suddenly be in it. And that and I think that made me feel better and forgive myself a little bit more even though there's nothing for me to forgive. You still feel like that yet. It's not like you're weak because you were in this. You could be the strongest person in the world and have also gone through this. They're not mutually exclusive.

**Lux Alprtraum had a similar experience. It took her years to realize she was an abusive relationship because she didn't see herself as the stereotype of the weak or submissive woman – which is a stereotype that Harley defies.**

LUX: One of the things that people don't always realize is that abuse can actually feel exciting. I think another work that really conveys this well is Eminem's collaboration with Rihanna, "Love The Way You Lie" that a lot of times and this is also speaks to how romance is depicted in pop culture. A lot of times when you're in an abusive relationship it's like you have a very intense fight. But when you have a very intense fight that's followed by this makeup period, which is also very intense. You know you feel like oh I'm ride or die for this person and like we're gonna do these terrible things and maybe even things I don't want to do but like I'm going to do them because this is what love is. I think that you know obviously there have been many different iterations of the Joker and Harley but this idea of love means harming yourself for another person. That's the rationale that underpins a lot of abuse that the way that you show love for a person is by enduring harm. And you certainly see I mean this is a story about a woman who gives up her entire career who mutilates herself in some ways for love, and for this man. I mean really like when I think about so many of my friends who've survived abuse relationships. Many of them have been like incredibly successful women are incredibly successful people who also seemingly incongruously in this very toxic romantic relationship.

***The word toxic is so interesting because I mean that is literally what happened I mean the Joker's creation story is he falls into a vat of chemicals. And there's a scene in Suicide Squad to prove her love to him. She has to fall into a literal toxic vat, literal toxicity to become Harley.***

LUX: Yeah, right! I mean which yeah exactly. I think so much of his loyalty to him just feels so it just feels really real to me just the way that you have this character feeling like such loyalty to someone who is so clearly awful.

*JOKER: Would you die for me?*

*HARLEY: Yes.*

*JOKER: That's too easy. Would you live for me? Hmmm?*

*HARLEY: Yes.*

**With every layer that was added to Harley Quinn, she became more human and less cartoonish, which allowed the character to finally break free. That's in a moment.**

## **BREAK**

**In 2013, DC comics wanted to give Harley her own comic book again. They chose a married couple to create the series -- Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner. The first thing they wanted to do was get her away from The Joker -- far from The Joker.**

JIMMY: We decided to OK we're going to take her out of Gotham because if she's going to be in her own book she shouldn't be stuck in the place where she's in eternal --

AMANDA: A secondary character like her own book.

JIMMY: Right, a B character, and being a New Yorker I said why not Coney Island?

**In case you were wondering, New York does exist in the DC universe. Where exactly Gotham's located is anyone's guess. But Harley is supposed to be from Brooklyn.**

AMANDA: You know people always say right we you know so. And Jimmy really knows Brooklyn.

JIMMY: Yeah I mean Coney Island was like you know by my park that I went to

AMANDA: That was your childhood.

JIMMY: Yeah

**The way they pitched the series was asking what would Harley do on her day off? That sounds like it might be kind of dull, but it was full of mayhem, and a lot of fun. In fact, their run was so successful; it lasted for four years – which is a long time for a creative team to work on a single character. And their issues have been collected in a six volume series of books. The series is still going on with a different creative team that recently sent Harley on to intergalactic adventures.**

**When Jimmy and Amanda first began the series, the trickiest thing was deciding how much The Joker's presence would loom over Harley while she was trying to establish a new life.**

JIMMY: We made it so that she thought about him a lot because sometimes you do you know think about your ex a lot and...

JIMMY: What are you saying Amanda?

AMANDA: (Laughs)

JIMMY: What are you saying?

AMANDA: Not everybody but she was the kind of person that would sort of obsess over lost loves and stuff like that. So it sort of worked for us. And then it was her climbing out of that that I miss you hole.

**The Joker kept playing mind games with her from afar until she finally confronts him, and gets the closure she needs a classic bloody Harley Joker style.**

JIMMY: We kind of talked out the scene because we wanted to make sure everything was right, because again it's somebody dealing with ending an abusive relationship. And we wanted to get the language right but we didn't think it was going to be, it was just part of

the story and we didn't think it was going to be singled out or something that was like a big change or, and then when the book came out it went through the roof and we were like oh OK I guess we hit on something here.

AMANDA: Yeah we had never had anybody really like have a storyline hit home for them quite the way this one did.

### **That storyline hit home for Nicole.**

NICOLE: You tear someone down like that they're going to want to get back at you friend like we've all even if we're not violent people. I think we all thought about it and I've definitely thought about beating the crap out of that -- I would never do it but I thought about it and made me feel a lot better because you have all this anger and you don't really know how to get it out. So seeing her kind of have this moment of strength and bravery to even look him in the face and talk to him like that's strength because you go in and you know like he's going to try to manipulate me, he's going to try to do something and if I open that door he could barge right in again. So I definitely lived vicariously through Harley as she went in that door, looked him in the face and was like basically you do not own me. You never owned me. And this is 100 percent done.

### **It was interesting to see what happened to Harley once she liberated herself from that toxic relationship. As writers, Jimmy and Amanda felt like the character just took on a life of her own.**

JIMMY: I got to say she's one of the easiest characters I've ever written. Yeah it's just so easy to write her because she's a wish fulfillment character. She is like you know somebody steps on a foot. She gives them a kick in the ass you know. It's like she's such an easy character to write because she wears her emotions like right on his sleeve. She reacts instantly without thinking and then she pauses and slows it down and then has integrity.

AMANDA: Barely

JIMMY: Barely! And it's interesting to write a character that in a matter of a page she's going to change she's going to change her point of view three or four times.

AMANDA: When I used to drive around the Tri-State area and somebody would cut me off. I always wish that I had a cannon mounted on my car so I could just blow the car out from in front of me. And I'm like you know we live in a civilized society we don't do that kind of thing. But Harley would. She does all the things that you wish you could do.

### **In fact, when the company would ask for "solicits," which is a summary of future issues for comic book stores, they didn't know what to do because the stories were never turning out the way they planned.**

JIMMY: He used to say he'd say give me that solicits for the next four issues and we'd make up something and then we'd write the book and it was completely different.

AMANDA: Very Harley of us!

JIMMY: Yeah very Harley of us, yeah.

**To use the terminology of D&D character alignments, Harley had gone from chaotic evil to chaotic neutral – from a villain to an anti-hero. And there are a lot of female villains and heroes in comics, but very few female anti-heroes. Amanda really appreciates that about Harley, especially now as they've working on Wonder Woman comics.**

AMANDA: Like I love Wonder Woman. I grew up with Wonder Woman but Wonder Woman is flawless. And you know she's so iconic and can do no wrong whereas Harley does a lot of stuff wrong and makes a lot of mistakes and has you know a lot of different emotions and is very, she's so much more relatable because she reflects a lot of our own feelings and that's and I think that's one of the reasons for her popularity.

**Jimmy and Amanda also made another big change to Harley. They put her in a romantic relationship with Poison Ivy. Ivy is also less of a villain these days because her motivation to save The Earth from humans doesn't seem so crazy anymore, even if her methods are extreme.**

**A lot of people thought Harley and Ivy had a gay-coded relationship going all the way back to the animated series. So fans like Nicole were thrilled that Jimmy and Amanda brought that subtext out in the open.**

NICOLE: I think that's so important to show that like as much as she is out of her mind and off the wall in a good way, she definitely has the capability to be in a functional relationship that you know doesn't need to have labels on it, and they're both very comfortable with that and very happy with that. Now everyone seems to be writing her that way and no one's kind of ignoring it anymore.

**In fact, Harley and Poison Ivy got married in a different comic book series called Bombshells, which isn't part of the official DC canon, it's kind of an alternative universe, but still it's a big deal.**

**Given what a force of nature Harley's become, I asked Lux Alptraum why it took so long for this character to break out on her own. Lux thinks it's because there are more and more fans now that don't fit the mold of the typical fan boy.**

LUX: There was this idea that all of these female characters if men like that it was purely as eye candy and women were not the audience. And I think a) we're now realizing that women are the audience for this stuff that if you give if you give all the marginalized populations who've been treated as just sidekicks or fringe stories that are well done stories that are lovingly crafted that they will spend money on them and they will be fans and they will be invested like. Number one we're finally realizing that, and number two I think we are finally going to a point where we realize that even white men who are supposedly the target audience for all this are capable of being interested in stories that are not just about white men.

This mini-series has been looking at who gets to tell stories, and who the writers assume the stories are for. There's nothing wrong with having a sidekick in a story. There can be something noble about helping someone else advance their story. But in life we usually make that choice. It's a sign of progress that storytellers are asking what motivates sidekicks to be in those roles. The great thing about Harley is that even when her motivations were psychologically unhealthy, they were always true to life, and which is what allowed the character to finally charge of her own life.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Lux Alptraum, Nicole Herviou, Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner. By the way, Amanda's drawings of Harley – which were more roller derby than baroque S&M – were so popular; they were turned into a series of action figures. I asked her what was the first thing she wanted to ditch about Harley's previous costumes.

AMANDA: It was the neck ruffles. I don't like that ruffles. Neck ruffles are the mullet of the 16th century. So I just don't like them at all. I don't like them on Queen Elizabeth might get those off!

If you want another recommendation of great depiction of Harley Quinn – check out Sean Murphy's 2018 graphic novel *White Night*. It explored what would happen if The Joker were given medication that "cured" him of his psychosis. I won't give anything more away but Harley is the real star of that story, and it explores her evolution as a character in a really unique way.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. I also now have an Instagram page, called Imaginary Worlds Podcast, where I put images of Harley through the years. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.