

Chinook's Edge teacher Renu Mathew fires up excitement for pottery on national TV show



Teaching ceramics classes at École Olds High School is something teacher Renu Mathew loves to do, and now her passion will be shared beyond classroom walls. Mathew is one of 10 competitors on CBC TV's "The Great Canadian Pottery Throw Down". Season 1 of the show premieres on February 8.

"I loved my experience on the show," said Mathew, who also said the show was filmed in Vancouver over an eight week period during July and August 2023. "I would do it again in a heartbeat. It was like summer camp for adults. I learned so much and really enjoyed meeting everyone on the show. Each artist had something unique to offer; I loved learning from other artists."

Even for skilled artists, not everything goes smoothly with ceramics. Mathew said, ***"Working with clay is always humbling. No matter how good you are, there are often technical issues. But just learning from everyone around you is what makes it so good."***

Mathew said her appearance on the show started with an interest in a similar series on British television. ***"It's a great show. During the pandemic I was able to use it to help students learn about ceramics," she said. "And then when I saw the announcement for a Canadian version of the show I just knew I had to apply."***

Mathew says her students are also beneficiaries of the experience, as she has incorporated what she learned into her classes. ***"When you are with a community of others who are doing what you do, it definitely helps. It was wonderful to be around artists who all work with clay. Learning new techniques from them has definitely upped my game."***

Also, as a result of her experience on the show, Mathew has been invited by other participants to travel to New Brunswick in the summer of 2024, to be an artist in residence.

This is the second television show Mathew has appeared on. Mathew was a contestant on the Food Network's Great Chocolate Showdown in 2020. Mathew teaches a chocolate class at Olds High, as well as ceramics, art, and cosmetology. ***"Using my hands to do anything artistic and expressive is what I love to do," she said.***



Above: Olds High student Carly Mix with teacher Renu Mathew

Top left: Renu Mathew on the set of the Great Canadian Pottery Throwdown. Photo courtesy of CBC.

Mathew tried ceramics for the first time as a high school student. ***“My first experience with clay was in an art class. Going on the wheel for the first time was really therapeutic. Then I tried plaster sculpture and was surprised I could do it. I knew I was good at painting, but in high school I discovered I can do sculpting too. I’ve loved it ever since.”***

Mathew is excited to see interest in pottery growing. She started offering ceramics at Olds High in 2014, in a combined class with art. Last year there was enough interest for the school to separate ceramics into its own classes at the Grades 10, 11 and 12 level. There is also an after school ceramics club offered for students that can't fit it into their schedule.

“My cousin told me about this class,” said Carly Mix, a Grade 10 Olds High student. ***“She said it was amazing so I wanted to try it for myself. It’s been really good. I love that I have it first thing in the morning. It’s relaxing and a good way to start my day.”***

Mix said she’s excited to know her teacher is on the CBC’s upcoming show. ***“That’s really cool,”*** said Mix. ***“I’ve never known someone on television before. I can tell people my teacher is on that show! And, it also means my teacher is really good at what she does - if she’s on tv for that.”***

Principal Meaghan Reist said, ***“Ecole Olds High School staff and students are proud to call Ms. Mathew our own, and we are incredibly excited to watch her on The Great Canadian Pottery Throwdown! Her participation on the show is a true testament to her skill as a ceramic artist. Olds High students are blessed to learn and benefit from her many skills, including the learning she has now gained from the show. Her Olds High school and community cannot wait to watch and cheer her on together.”***



Top: Renu Mathew and student Kolsen Matchullis, Olds High student

Middle: Olds High student Karina Rozdorzhnyuk

Bottom left: Renu Mathew on the set of the Great Canadian Pottery Throwdown, with other contestants, judges and hosts. Photo courtesy of CBC.



There is a ‘watch party’ at Olds High scheduled for February 8 when the first episode airs.

Here’s a link to a preview of the Great Canadian Pottery Throwdown:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPnA8Q5PI24>



Chinook's Edge teacher Melissa McQueen writes a chapter in newly published book...

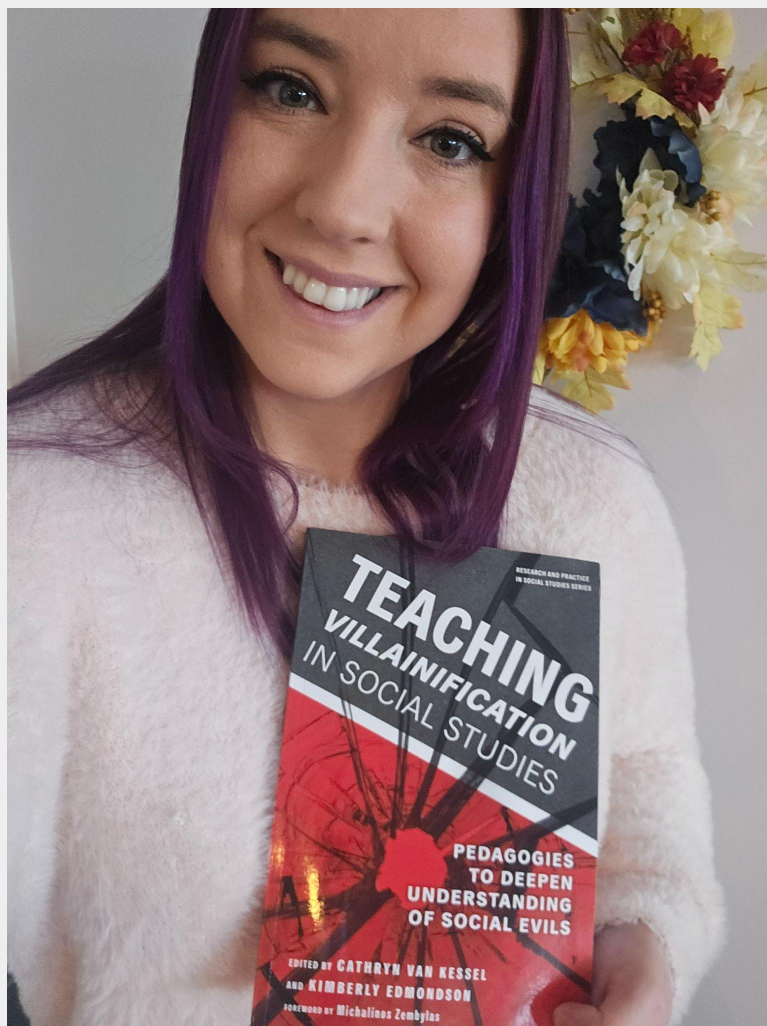
on the use of pop culture to help students engage more deeply with curriculum

Melissa McQueen, a teacher at École HJ Cody School, has co-authored a chapter in a book called "Teaching Villainification in Social Studies". The chapter is called "Wanda the Villain?: How *WandaVision* Can Aid Discussions About Enslavement and Anti Black Racism."

"When I chose to become a teacher I didn't think about becoming published," said Melissa McQueen. "I have been a teacher for only five years, and recognize I have a lot to learn yet, so it's a weird feeling to think that what I am doing has been published in a book."

Although McQueen may have been surprised at this career development, her colleagues are not. The Principal of École H.J. Cody School, Alex Lambert, said, ***"We are impressed that Melissa has written this chapter. It speaks of her commitment to deeply understanding Social Studies, and passing on her love for the topic to her students."***

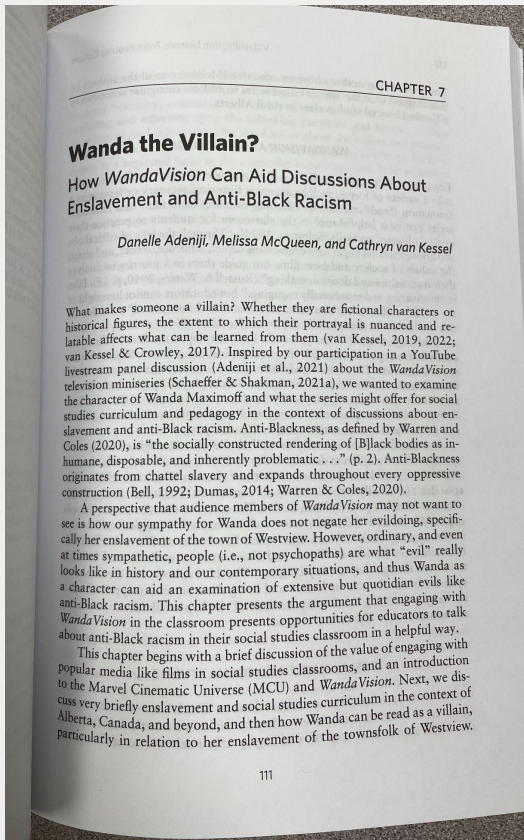
Having a chapter in a publication all began with McQueen trying to create interesting and accessible connections for her students to the social studies curriculum. ***"I was noticing that some topics were difficult for students to want to engage with,"*** said McQueen.



"For instance, when we study liberalism and how governments have subverted freedoms, it was hard for students to want to engage with that topic during the pandemic. They were experiencing limits on their personal freedoms at that time, so the discussions in social studies about that were uncomfortable for some," said McQueen.

McQueen said during that time she was watching the television series *WandaVision*, based on Marvel Comics, and realized some of the same themes were present in that series. McQueen chose to bring portions of episodes into her classroom, as a starting point for conversations.





Wanda the Villain?

How *WandaVision* Can Aid Discussions About Enslavement and Anti-Black Racism

Danelle Adeniji, Melissa McQueen, and Cathryn van Kessel

What makes someone a villain? Whether they are fictional characters or historical figures, the extent to which their portrayal is nuanced and relatable affects what can be learned from them (van Kessel, 2019, 2022; van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Inspired by our participation in a YouTube livestream panel discussion (Adeniji et al., 2021) about the *WandaVision* television miniseries (Schaeffer & Shakman, 2021a), we wanted to examine the character of Wanda Maximoff and what the series might offer for social studies curriculum and pedagogy in the context of discussions about enslavement and anti-Black racism. Anti-Blackness, as defined by Warren and Coles (2020), is “the socially constructed rendering of [B]lack bodies as inhumane, disposable, and inherently problematic . . .” (p. 2). Anti-Blackness originates from chattel slavery and expands throughout every oppressive construction (Bell, 1992; Dumas, 2014; Warren & Coles, 2020).

A perspective that audience members of *WandaVision* may not want to see is how our sympathy for Wanda does not negate her evildoing, specifically her enslavement of the town of Westview. However, ordinary, and even at times sympathetic, people (i.e., not psychopaths) are what “evil” really looks like in history and our contemporary situations, and thus Wanda as a character can aid an examination of extensive but quotidian evils like anti-Black racism. This chapter presents the argument that engaging with *WandaVision* in the classroom presents opportunities for educators to talk about anti-Black racism in their social studies classroom in a helpful way.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the value of engaging with popular media like films in social studies classrooms, and an introduction to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and *WandaVision*. Next, we discuss very briefly enslavement and social studies curriculum in the context of Alberta, Canada, and beyond, and then how Wanda can be read as a villain, particularly in relation to her enslavement of the townsfolk of Westview.

“I could see it helped students to talk about difficult topics,” she said. “The characters were familiar and comfortable, and it was easier for students to want to connect with the curriculum.”

McQueen said some of the resulting student projects were really well done, and quite creative. Over the past four years of using the show in her classrooms, she observes, ***“It’s been cool to see how students engage with social studies through the lens of pop culture.”***

During the past few years, McQueen has stayed connected with a professor from her university experience. As the professor learned what McQueen was doing with *WandaVision* in her classroom, she encouraged McQueen to seek a Master’s degree and further probe at the topic. When that same professor chose to publish a book about villainification in Social Studies, she asked McQueen (along with a scholar located in Texas who was exploring similar themes - Danelle Adeniji) if she would be interested in co-writing a chapter for the book.

McQueen said she appreciates the focus of the book, and its intent to help teachers work with students to see the nuances of the world around them. ***“I hope it helps students see others around them as more human. Rather than ending up with the message of ‘it’s me against the world’, maybe more students can leave Social Studies with a hope that they can make a difference.”***

McQueen’s passion for Social Studies started early in her life, with a mother that served as Alberta’s Minister of Energy and also Minister of Environment. ***“I grew up running home from school to watch Rick Mercer’s Monday report. I loved that in our family we would talk about history and politics and the impacts,” she said.***

“I could certainly see and feel that I could impact the future of my community,” said McQueen, “and I want that for my students. I want them to leave my class with a hope for possible futures, and a clear understanding they can be active in shaping those futures.”

