

# Episode 28: The Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros

We're limping toward the end of the year folks, and more importantly, Sydney has been allowed back into pubs. Which is great for me because it means that I have people to bounce my ideas off, instead of just watching too much TV like a little goblin. So last night, I was at the pub with a friend and at one point, it doesn't matter why, but I ended up yelling, "I don't trust Ryan Reynolds! He's up to something!"

Every so often we do an episode on this podcast that is just about a guy... mostly action guys. Sometimes weird guys. Sometimes the unique overlap of the two. Despite my initial gut reaction, I'm not inherently against Ryan Reynolds. He's something of a late 90s, early 00s poster boy, so he's just kind of forever lodged in my brain as a tanned dude with frosted tips... even though I know he's definitely a dad now and going fashionably grey.

But, this podcast's dedication to investigating guys and what they're up to knows no bounds. Ryan Reynolds is some guy, and, having rewatched a bunch of his films, I've got some questions. I am here with my little magnifying glass and sexy dollar-store detective costume to do a deep dive.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Ryan Reynolds.

Ryan Reynolds launched his acting career in Canada in the early 90s, on a teen soap called Hillside. He worked sporadically throughout mid-90s, and you can see him pop up in episodes of The X-Files and Sabrina the Teenage Witch. But his big break came in 1998, with the sitcom Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place, which ran for four seasons and is mostly about what it says on the tin. From there he's done a bunch of roles that have included everything from rom coms, to action flicks, to smaller indie dramas. But now, in 2021 you probably know him for two things: being a nice guy, who loves his wife, actress Blake Lively, and being Deadpool, in the 2016 surprise box office success, Deadpool.

Like I said in the intro, the podcast loves to occasionally just do an episode that's about wondering what the fuck some guy is up to. But the thing with doing entire episode about just some Hollywood guy is that they have to be either exceptional at what they do, or just insane. Ryan Reynolds is neither really. He's a fine enough actor. Like you're not going to see him win an Oscar, but he also has the good grace not to be taking on needlessly slow and serious roles in an attempt to win an Oscar, so it kind of balances out overall. I have a great appreciation for actors who know their range. And the most insane thing he's done recently is become co-owner of a Welsh football

team. Which is more frivolous than insane – he's not the first celebrity to start buying into sports teams. Bon Jovi owned the majority share of an American football team called the Philadelphia Soul. Russell Crowe co-owned Australian NRL team the Rabbitohs. I'm obligated on behalf of the three people that I know and love who are into the NRL, including the producer of this podcast, to say "Glory, glory to South Sydney. Up the mighty Rabbitohs." But I want you to know that these are just words to me. I digress. Ryan Reynolds owns a Welsh football team and has started making a documentary on them.

The point is, he feels hard guy to do a full episode on, because he's just sort of universally beloved. Every profile written on him fastidiously documents what a hard worker and a nice guy he is. He shows up to do a cheeky personal branding/ actual branding exercise (aside from a football team, he also owned a gin company, a marketing firm and a mobile service provider). Then he does a middle-of-the-road box office hit and then disappears in a cloud of smoke. What could you possibly say? Well look... it's hard, yes. But not impossible. You see, having watched an unconscionable number of Ryan Reynolds movies back-to-back now, I've noticed a distinct similarity in the type of character Reynolds plays, and I'm developing a theory.

I call this theory the Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros – the Ouroboros of course being the symbol of a snake eating its own tail, which is found across cultures, and is often interpreted as a symbol for eternal cyclic renewal. Ryan Reynolds is a handsome Canadian snake, slowly

devouring his own tail, endlessly renewing the architecture of one character in shiny new skin. Now, if you spend any time online reading listicles or watching YouTube clips of late-night shows, where Ryan Reynolds really thrives on being a nice guy with a quick wit, there's a good chance you're thinking, "Alex, everyone loves Ryan Reynolds. He's funny in interviews and seems like a nice man who loves his wife. Why are you out here associating him with the incredibly disturbing image of a man stripping his own skin from the feet up using only his teeth?"

The main answer is, "Because I pictured it and now you have to too", but the second answer is "Look, hear me out." Obviously, it's not uncommon for actors of a certain type to play the same or similar roles over and over again. Sometimes it's easier to just sink into comfortable roles like a warm bath. If everyone thinks you look like the hero who runs into the burning building or the hapless loser getting saved, why fight the feeling? Not everyone is an artist. Mark Wahlberg is never not playing a guy from Boston with a chip on his shoulder, and he's worth hundreds of millions of dollars. You can stick with what you know and still be profitable. But generally, with this kind of type casting people take roles that are the same when you boil them down. They're playing a cop, then a detective, then an FBI agent, then a private detective, then an army captain with an inherent sense of justice trying to right a wrong. These are all big damn heroes in authoritative positions, looking at bit like they might be an underdog for a bit because their sense of justice is just so much larger than everyone else's. They



are all the same role.

What I think is kind of interesting about Ryan Reynolds' roles over time is that he is playing the same guy in every movie, but in characters that are vastly different. He's played crooked cops, frat boys, super heroes, anti-heroes, love interests, art thieves and family men just trying to fix up the haunted houses they sunk their life savings into for some reason. He's done some genre hopping, the motivations vary, but the guy is still the same. And to understand why this is fascinating rather than either infuriating or some indictment of his acting, I think we have to first understand why Reynolds' career almost completely stalled. Only from there can we understand his self-consuming reinvention.

Ryan Reynolds looks like a leading man – he's 6ft 2' with tan skin, a megawatt smile and a square jaw. He was named People's Sexiest Man Alive in 2010, which is a measure of something, even if it's how hot the overlap of people who still buy print media and people who are interested in celebrities find you. Despite that, his career was something of a slow build. His filmography is all over the place. It goes from National Lampoons to Blade to The Amityville Horror to X-Men, with stops over at bit parts at weird indie flicks in the middle. But by 2011, following his turn as Wade Wilson in the X-Men films and a successful turn in The Proposal, alongside Sandra Bullock, Hollywood decided that Reynolds was ready for the big leagues. They cast him as bona fide DC comic book hero, Hal Gordon or the Green Lantern. This was a proper, big budget superhero film – a real career maker.

Except it was bad – mind-numbingly, abysmally bad. I'll give you a sample of some of the reviews. The Associated Press called it a "joyless amalgamation of expository dialogue and special effects that aren't especially special." The Rotten Tomatoes review amalgamator calls it "noisy, over produced and thinly written". There was also a mean undercurrent to a lot of the criticism, which pointed out Reynolds' chiselled face as an annoyance (as opposed to being just a stock standard thing that movie stars have). It was named one of the 10 worst films of 2011 and made \$219 million at the box office off the back of a \$200 million budget. I have a high tolerance for this kind of terrible film, and even I have struggled to get through it. It's not good. In fact, it was so resoundingly not good that it essentially derailed Reynolds' career immediately. The sequel that Warner Brothers had planned was instantly cancelled, thus stripping away the only reason anyone would ever sign on to a superhero movie – franchise money and job security. The fact that his performance wasn't called out as some sort of saving grace in an otherwise terrible film essentially meant that he was slapped with a big sticker that said "box office poison" and relegated to the ranks of indie films, bland comedies and documentary narration.

If that seems like a fairly large overreaction to a film that mostly seemed to be suffering from overambition and under-delivery, I think you're probably right, but Sam Adams writing for Slate has I think really hit on why Reynolds' career is littered with so many half-starts. He says, "No matter how hard Reynolds tried to come across as a good-

hearted hero—like the hapless assistant dragooned into a green card marriage by Sandra Bullock's Canadian book editor in *The Proposal*—Reynolds couldn't help but radiate a certain smarminess. It was as if he'd already watched the movie and knew you were going to end up having to like him, whether you wanted to or not." I think this is true to a certain extent, perhaps because in interviews Reynolds also tends to lean into a smart-alec humour that could be smugly mean if he let it. Coupled with movie star looks that's a recipe for resentment even if you can't put your finger on why – as exemplified by criticism of *Green Lantern* that spent an inordinate amount of time talking about how irritatingly straight Reynolds' teeth were. Which brings me back to the Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros, and perhaps the root of all smarminess. His first role in *Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place* is not the snake necessarily. I think it's more like the snake egg. The birth before the rebirth, if you will.

Reynolds plays one of the titular guys – Michael "Berg" Bergen, a perpetual slacker, who plays the zany weirdo to his roommate's straight man. The character is likeable, but in that smarmy, TV way where if you knew anyone like him in real life, you'd probably want to murder him. Berg is a loveable annoyance and a secret genius, whose roommate is (probably rightfully) indignant that he effortlessly breezes through a triple major before deciding to go to medical school on a whim, and preparing for his exams by watching re-runs of *General Hospital*. He gives great life advice but he's also a fuck up who can't stay serious for more than a minute.

Following the show's cancellation, Reynolds went on to star in National Lampoon's *Van Wilder: Party Liaison* in 2002. He plays Van Wilder – a beloved big man on campus who, despite his cool guy status, is never cruel, but rather lives to show fellow college kids the full spectrum of earthly delights available to students. He knows everything about everyone on campus, and plans parties to reflect their personalities. He's also a slacker and a secret genius who is refusing to graduate because he is scared of the real world. He speaks only in zingy one-liners and you can almost feel the wink at the camera. This is the first rebirth – the character is essentially Berg again, but with the some of the more abrasive elements (like his selfishness) smoothed out. The Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros becomes fully formed here. Every role that Reynolds plays from here on out takes this archetype and refines it. Even in roles where he's supposed to be the big stupid action guy, like in *Blade: Trinity*, he's still given the comedic crescendos. Each new iteration smooths away something that might have gone out of style – less gross out sex humour, more wide-eyed interest in bossy women, little tweaks to the dick jokes so they're not as homophobic. Whatever works for the time period.

The problem is these characters are still not instantly loveable. The smarminess Adams pointed out is still there. So, how did he turn it around then? Adams' argument for how Reynolds went from box office dud to beloved Hollywood wife guy is simple – he took a page out of Katherine Hepburn's book and let himself take the punch. In the 1930s, Katherine Hepburn was declared to be box office poison by the Independent Theatre



Owners of America after people got sick of seeing a woman with willpower and opinions onscreen. The solution was a comeback vehicle where she was still a woman with opinions, but coming up against a cruel male lead who takes her down a notch. Something for the Hepburn haters and something for the Hepburn lovers, with the real winner being Hepburn's revitalised career.

Adams argues Reynolds has done the same thing. He says, "Reynolds couldn't hide his pretty face in every movie, of course...but he made up for it by turning himself into a human punching bag... The thing about Reynolds' characters in these movies is that they have earned their cockiness, up to a point... But that slight distance from the top eats away at them, and it lets us watch them with affection instead of resentment." And the first vehicle he had to do that with was Deadpool.

The so-called 'merc with a mouth', the character of Deadpool gave Reynolds free reign to make as many blue jokes as he liked – jokes about pegging, about wanting to smooch the giant metal X-Man (Colossus), getting your lower half blown off and replaced with a little baby body as it regenerates. The idea of Deadpool is that he is extremely good at what he does – a genius even – but he's too unhinged to not also be a complete liability. He constantly breaks the fourth wall to continue making quips at the audience, even when he's alone. It would probably be totally unbearable, if he wasn't getting the absolute living shit kicked out of him over and over again. Deadpool can't die – that's his mutation and curse. Which gave Reynolds, who

co-wrote the film, free reign to get shot in the head, blown up by a grenade, have his legs cut off, amputate his own arms and just generally use his body as a shield and additional weapon. It's maximum snark, followed immediately by maximum violence. Something for the lovers and the haters.

This pattern continued into other films, like *The Hitman's Bodyguard*, *6 Underground* or most recently, *Red Notice*, where Reynold's character has everything almost perfect but then is thwarted by his own self-assuredness and righteously smacked around by the universe. Now, I think if you were talking to someone who hadn't watched eight Ryan Reynolds movies back-to-back in a weekend, they'd probably be inclined to say that my Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros theory really only kicks in when *Deadpool* is released in 2016. After all, that's when Reynolds actually becomes unrelentingly likeable again. But I don't think that takes into account the fact that there hasn't actually been any real shift in the characters themselves – they're all slacker geniuses who talk a mile a minute, have secret hearts of gold and get in their own way a lot. The only difference now is that we're more willing to let the Ryan Reynolds industrial complex succeed because he's humbly allowed his face to be cracked open in new and creative ways.

So, what have we learned from looking at the Ryan Reynolds Ouroboros? Look, not a lot, really. Sometimes an episode about a guy is just a look at some dude making the system work for him. And that's OK. Long may he continue to shed his tanned Canadian skin, and be reborn as a lightly sandpapered version of the





previous Reynolds, ready to get the shit kicked out of him.

Well, that was an episode on Ryan Reynolds. I think the main thing I got out of it is that I need someone to rewatch the Deadpool movies for me and tell me if they hold up. I watched so many Ryan Reynolds movies back-to-back it's become literally impossible for me to tell if they're any better or worse than other things he's done. If you've recently rewatched either of the Deadpool movies, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!

This episode premiered on 17th November 2021.

Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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