Ruth Candler 00:15
Welcome to W&L After Class, the lifelong learning podcast. I’m your host, Ruth Candler. In every episode we’ll have engaging conversations with W&L’s expert faculty, bringing you again to the Colonnade even if you’re hundreds of miles away. Just like the conversations that happen every day after class here at W&L. You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds and continue your journey of lifelong learning.

Our guest today is Associate Professor of History Mikki Brock. Professor Brock joined W&L in 2014, and has taught courses on British history, the Protestant Reformation, witch hunts, conceptions of the devil in the Western world and a host of other topics. Her research interests include religious beliefs and identities in early modern Scotland, demonology and witchcraft. She has released two books, "Satan and the Scots: The Devil in Post-Reformation Scotland," and "Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period," which she edited with Richard Raiswell and David Winter. She has two more books in progress, including "The Rutledge History of the Devil in the Western Tradition," due out in 2023. She is also the co-director of "Mapping the Scottish Reformation," a data visualization project tracing the careers of Scottish clergy from 1516 to 1689.

Mikki, thanks so much for joining us today.

Mikki Brock 01:37
Thank you for having me.

Ruth Candler 01:38
So in keeping with the religious holidays at this time of year, including Halloween, we'll be talking about the supernatural today, which is, of course, your research specialty. I'd like to begin by asking you to help us understand what the term "supernatural" means and where it came from. Or has it always been with us?

Mikki Brock 01:57
Yeah, that's a great question. So literally, the term supernatural means "above nature." And it's a term that isn't actually used all that much in academic discourse, theological discourse, political discourse, until the more modern era. You see sometimes theologians talking about the supernatural in the medieval or early modern period, but what they're talking about there isn't our conception of the supernatural. What they mean when they say "supernatural" is God, right, and the knowledge that God has, because the fundamental idea for them is that the supernatural is anything that exists above nature, and the only thing that exists above nature is that which created it — God of course.

But when we think of "supernatural," we think of the TV show "Supernatural," of worlds filled with vampires and werewolves and witches and warlocks and fairies and ghosts and so on. But those things, in the period that I work on, would have been called preternatural, which is to say things that were somewhat within the natural world, but pushed on its boundaries in a whole host of ways. And what I think is fascinating is, you know, by the 18th and 19th century, people started to equate "supernatural" with superstition, right, a way to describe a world that wasn't as quote-unquote "enlightened" as the period in which they were living.
Ruth Candler 03:20
So, now, witches, demons and fairies have haunted European and American history for hundreds of years, although attitudes toward them have evolved. Have witches, demons and fairies always been considered supernatural, or were they sometimes seen as a natural part of the real world?

Mikki Brock 03:36
Often in the modern world, and in our modern parlance, we tend to talk about the supernatural as things we don't really expect to encounter in our lives, right, things that are fantastical, sometimes fictional, things that are maybe occasionally miraculous occurrences but not part of our everyday landscape of life. But in the period that I study, so which is really the 16th and 17th century, people expected to encounter witches and fairies and ghosts and demons on the sort of path of their life, right, at least at one point or another. They believed their worlds were filled with all of these beings that operated within nature, but sometimes pushing its bounds in really critical ways.

So I would say that the ordinary person on the street in the period that I work on would not have made a really sort of fine-tuned distinction between supernatural, preternatural and natural. For them, the natural world was always alive with these otherworldly beings.

Ruth Candler 04:35
When you think about all of these changes, and all the history that has occurred since the first time someone was called a witch, is it possible for you to give us a definition of a witch?

Mikki Brock 04:47
I can. In fact, I was just... I'm teaching my Age of the Witch Hunts course this semester. It's one of my all-time favorite courses to teach, and the students are just really, really excellent. And we were reading a source that actually was providing a definition of a witch that I think works really well across the board.

So in the period that I study, a witch was conceived of as someone who wittingly and willingly, that is to say, with her own consent, engaged in a pact with the devil, whereby being able to practice harmful magic, thus wreaking havoc on people's lives and on Christendom writ large. And that is a very specific, early modern definition of a witch. That is to say, thinking of a person who is a witch is someone who not only has the ability to wield black magic or harmful magic, but someone who derives that magical power through a deal with the devil, right. And that's a really critical component.

We don't tend to, sort of, when we think about witches, remember or recognize the importance of the devil to that equation, right. And what made the witch so terrifying in the period that I study was not just the exercise of magic that could cause harm, but the fact that she did it as an agent, as a servant of Satan. What makes the witch so frightening then in the premodern world is the belief that she colluded with the devil. And even as important, perhaps more important, is the idea that she was not operating autonomously.
So the vision of witchcraft that took hold really over the course of the 14th and 15th century and really crystallized by the time you get to the age of the great witch hunts in the 16th century, is the idea that a witch is part of a much broader group, an almost underground conspiracy of individuals working with the devil to completely overthrow Christendom. And that is what made them so fearful. And it’s why certain ideas like the witches’ Sabbath, right, these meetings of women with the devil by cover of night, were so frightening and also so critical to the perpetuation of witch belief. If you just thought it was a lone ranger witch causing a problem, then it’s not as frightening as if you think it’s genuinely an underground society, right, almost an anti-church that’s set up.

Ruth Candler 07:01
So some people were very frightened. But there were also those that were not. Were these folks generally trying to speak to the devil and practice dark magic, or was there something else going on?

Mikki Brock 07:14
So this is a really good question, because it gets at something that I’m asked every time I talk about this, which is sort of, you know, “Was there any there there?” Right, with something actually going on that was valid that authorities were trying to prosecute? And embedded in that question is “Were people trying to practice magic?” And I think one thing that’s really critical to recognize is, so, there were people trying to practice magic, no doubt, right. There were people who were learned individuals at the courts of monarchs who were trying to practice ritual magic at times, there were local village healers, and wise women who would try to engage in magic as something that was benign and potentially helpful. And sure, there were those who used curses or potentially recipes, things like that to harm their neighbors. But those people are not really the target of the great witch hunts. And I think that’s really useful to note.

So, you know, people across time and space have tried to practice magic. But the concept of the witch, when witches start to really be hunted, is not the concept of the wise folk woman or the benign healer in a given town. It’s the idea that actually embedded in any practice of magic is the looming presence of Satan. And that is what causes it to be so terrifying and so fearful. So even if there were those that might practice witchcraft, or practice magic casually, there’s certainly no evidence in any way, shape or form that people were engaged in the kind of demonic witchcraft that led to so many people being put to their deaths in this period.

Ruth Candler 08:50
Why were witches usually women? Or is that a stereotype that developed in modern times?

Mikki Brock 08:56
No, well, yeah. So that’s a really another fantastic question. And it’s actually one of the questions that’s at the center of a lot of work on witchcraft. And it’s very much at the center of my Age of the Witch Hunts course. So about 80 to 85% of those accused and convicted of witchcraft in the period that I study, the early modern period, were women. So you did have occasional male witches, but these tended to be men who were related to a woman accused of witchcraft in some way, right. So by association could find themselves vulnerable to those accusations.
But beyond this, it really was an idea that targeted women. So the vast majority of the accused witches were women. One thing that I think is important to note is that witch hunting was actually about hunting witches. And by that, I mean, it wasn't about hunting women, it wasn't about eradicating women in some way. And I think sometimes the events of the witch hunts have been misconstrued in that fashion. That said, when you ask, "Well, who is a witch?" Most people would have responded women, right? And the question is why? And it dates back to... it goes back to Genesis, frankly, right into ideas about women at the very creation of, sort of, the world in so many respects, to the story in the garden where Eve purportedly violated one of God's fundamental tenets by convincing, by, you know, taking the apple and persuading Adam to do the same. And at the core of that story is the idea that Eve was tempted by the serpent, who was reinterpreted in the second century as the devil, and that became the normal way of thinking about it.

So if you actually go back and read Genesis, there's nothing about the serpent being Satan. That's a later second-century gloss on that text. But that absolutely becomes the main way people thought about that particular story. Now, the reason that that matters, that it matters to think that the serpent was Satan, is that from the beginning, women are vulnerable to the devil, and women have, because of their vulnerability and their carnal lust, and their, their sort of what people would call their slippery tongues, and their untruthiness, right, they were also agents of disorder in Christian society. So that lineage is really, really critical. And there's also the belief broadly, that not just can women not be trusted, not just are women prone to all sorts of bad behaviors, but also because women are weaker, and because they lack a certain degree of political power and economic power and social prestige, that they're the most likely group to be willing to make a deal with the devil in order to be able to practice magic and thus gain some power for themselves.

Ruth Candler 11:39
Oh, my gosh. That's fascinating. So witches, ghosts and goblins play a starring role on Halloween. So it won't be long before we all will be on the lookout again. I grew up near Salem, Massachusetts, which is the birthplace of the American witch hunt. So as a child, I kept a sharp eye out for witches. I think everyone who has read "The Crucible" or seen Arthur Miller's play knows something about Salem's witch trials. But Salem wasn't alone, right? How widespread were the witch trials in New England during the 17th and 18th century?

Mikki Brock 12:14
I'm so glad you asked that, because, you know, the Salem witch trials are happening in the early 1690s. And in some ways, they postdate the height of the witch trials if we take a broader view of how witch hunting played out in the 16th and 17th century.

So one thing I always tell my students is the witch hunts were not just a New England-Salem phenomenon, they weren't just for Puritans run amok. Actually, the witch hunts spanned all the way from Russia, to France, to the Holy Roman Empire, to Scotland, to England, and of course, to the British colonies, and in particular, in Salem. And the numbers are huge, right? Or comparatively huge to what people might imagine. So we're talking about over 100,000 individuals accused of witchcraft that we know formally went through the judicial process, right, witch hunting was a judicial process, the courts were involved, this wasn't just some extrajudicial prosecution. This happened in a very
systematic way in this period, going through the courts. And of those, you know, about 50,000 are executed at the stake or at the noose. So it's a tremendously widespread phenomenon. And so Salem... Actually, the height of the witch trials is, you know, from roughly 1560 to 1650. And Salem is quite late, right, Salem is sort of at the tail end of this phenomenon that's much larger than what happens there.

Ruth Candler 13:19
Wow. Oh, I didn't realize the order of that. I think I had it backwards. So an interesting portrayal of witchcraft in pop culture comes in the book and TV show "Good Omens," which features a group of comical, down-on-their-luck British witch hunters with an organizational lineage reaching back to the 1600s. Were there really witch hunters back then? And if so, who employed them? And how did they perform their jobs?

Mikki Brock 14:04
So there were witch hunters. I should also say there weren't just witch hunters, those who were tasked with, you know, going from village to village to root out witchcraft. There were also a whole host of university professors and doctors and lawyers and clerics who wrote about a field of study called demonology, trying to understand the interactions between demons and purported witches. So witchcraft and witch hunting was not some marginalized field of study. I mean, they were teaching this at the University of Paris and at Oxford, you know, all of the major universities would have talked about demonology and the operation of demons, and by extension, who witches were and how to hunt them. And in some places, people really took up the mantle of witch hunter.

So you have, for example, in Germany, you know, a guy called Heinrich Kramer, who wrote probably the most notorious witch hunting manual, the "Malleus Maleficarum," which literally means the hammer of witches. And he went around really trying to bring women to their death for this crime. In the case of Britain, and England more specifically, you have someone called Matthew Hopkins who's operating in the 1640s. And he is going around from town to town during the chaos of the English Civil War, when the Puritans are in charge of things, essentially, and trying to find who witches were, looking for women who might be accused, having his people search them for the devil's mark, right, which was believed to be a good sign of witchcraft, a foolproof sign of witchcraft.

So this was very much mainstream. And often that work was supported by the church, and sometimes supported by monarchs themselves, right? The king of Scotland in the late 16th century is himself a witch hunter of sorts. He writes a witchcraft treatise and presides over witch trials. So this is very much at the sort of center of judicial and theological and intellectual life in this period with massive social impact.

Ruth Candler 16:03
All right, so I have to go back a minute. You said there was a manual. Is this like a textbook sort of thing?

Mikki Brock 16:09
Oh, sure. I think I probably have a copy in my office. My students read part of this this morning. So all of these demonological texts were treated like guides to identifying and prosecuting witches, and they... Some of them really do read like a manual. So you know, for example, there's something called the Compendium Maleficarum, which is by a guy called Francesco Guazzo, written in the early 17th century, and it has a bunch of steps that they envisioned people as taking to enter into a pact with Satan. And this was accompanied by woodcuts, right, illustrations from the period so you could know what you were looking for.

It's not dissimilar to the way that we share various types of literature for identifying problems and rooting them out, right, it's... This was seen as a tremendously widespread issue. And the people with knowledge devoted a lot of time to grappling with that issue. So there are lots and lots of these sorts of works, but the "Malleus Maleficarum," 1486, is probably the most notorious of all. It's a ludicrously misogynistic and awful text, but it's fascinating and very influential.

**Ruth Candler 17:15**
You had mentioned that in the manual there... ah... People would look for the mark of the devil on a witch. What did that look like?

**Mikki Brock 17:22**
Because they thought so thoroughly about how a witch entered into a pact with Satan, and the ways in which that pact could then turn into giant witches' Sabbaths and things like that... Those are things that are kind of unprovable, right, like how can you in a judicial system prove that the pact was entered into if that's something that happens under cover of night? You know, often the witch was imagined to meet the devil on a crossroads on a dark night. Well, how do you prove that that happened? So the devil's mark becomes a way that... and it's in some way, it's an inversion of the baptismal sort of mark, right? All of these things are inversions of normative Christian practices.

So the idea is that you could search a witch's body and find evidence of her removing herself from the book of life and committing herself to Satan. And they thought that these marks could show up in the form of, say, a third nipple, or a mole or an abnormal scar, things that are not particularly unusual. But this is a period in which people felt that the body manifested inner sin in a whole host of ways. So, literally, when a woman was accused of witchcraft, she could be dragged to the court. And if she sort of passed that initial... if they decided that there was enough evidence there to pursue it, they could take her to the jail. And then local women, at the behest of the magistrate or cleric who's overseeing things, would go in and search her, sometimes shaving her head to look for a mark. And then when that mark was found, they would prick it to see if it bled. And the idea was that the devil's marks were insensible to pain. And that that would be a way to find that out. So it's pretty gruesome stuff.

**Ruth Candler 19:00**
So but you could find... I mean, everybody has marks on their body, a freckle, a mole, a whatever.

**Mikki Brock 19:04**
Indeed! Yeah. That's right.
Okay. So of course, once the witch is caught, she's going to be tried. What actually happened during a typical European witch trial?

There is some variety, but the broad parameters are this. So sometimes you could have the accusations brought by clerics, you could have accusations brought by inquisitors or those witch hunters who are going about the countryside looking for witches. But even more often than that you had accusations of witchcraft brought by a sort of private party, right? That is to say, a neighbor, someone who's living in the village who saw an old woman down the road giving them, you know, the stink eye, muttering something under their breath, and then worrying that that was going to lead to witchcraft.

And usually at that initial accusation level, they're not worried about the demonic stuff. They're worried about, "She cursed me and my husband's impotent," right, "She cursed me and my crops have died." But then when it gets to the court, they start to really question the accused witch. That is when those learned authorities, by and large, start to ask very leading questions about the devil: "When did you meet with the devil? Did you make a pact with them? Were you with any other women when you did this?" And often there is either the threat or the actual application of torture to that person. And that is what sort of leads to these incredibly detailed, fantastical, often horrifying confessions.

So getting that confession is seen as really critical on the part of a lot of these courts, and in areas where there was more torture, there were more women who were executed for the crime of witchcraft. And thus more accusations, right, stemming from that fear of witches in their midst.

Very cyclical. Am I correct remembering that the first woman accused of being a witch in Salem somehow survived?

You are correct in remembering that. Yeah, so the first woman accused of witchcraft in Salem was Tituba, and she... Tituba was an enslaved woman who was enslaved by the minister of that New England community — often New England thinks that it doesn't have its own history of enslavement, but of course it does, right — and the minister of Salem Village at the time, a guy called Samuel Parris, had brought Tituba — and her husband, probably, we don't know exactly his origin — with him from Barbados. So she was very likely a West Indian woman.

And she's the first person accused when the young girls in Salem Village start to have their fits. They claim that Tituba bewitched them. But she is a really sort of savvy character in this way: Very quickly, she recognizes what the minister wants of her and what the, sort of, men of the town and the judicial magistrates who are running things want of her. And they ask her a lot of leading questions. Samuel Parris also beats her into confession, but she provides the demonological narrative that they're looking for to continue on with the trials, right? She tells them, "Yes, the devil is about. Here are some other women that I've seen at the witches' Sabbath." She gives them all of this information. And that's what
leads things to sort of spiral out of control, but because she keeps giving them that information, they keep her around because it justifies the process.

Ruth Candler 22:21
So a great strategy for other women who are accused?

Mikki Brock 22:24
I should say, actually, Salem is very odd in this way. Most places, if you confess, dunzo, right, that is your death sentence. But she... A lot of things are sort of unique about Salem, but one of them is that they often kept those who confessed around for a little longer to point their finger elsewhere.

Ruth Candler 22:43
So we often encounter the phrase "witch hunt" today. Do you think that term is used correctly? Or have we totally forgotten just how terrible these trials were for the women who were accused?

Mikki Brock 22:56
The first thing I'll say is that I don't think language has to be static, right? Obviously, words and phrases take on different meanings at different times. And we don't always have to retain the original purity of a word, of course. But I think one of the things that really has happened is that "witch hunt" has become a way for people to position themselves as victims when really they're the people in positions of power. And you see that in a whole host of ways today, right? During the #MeToo era, for example, there were... It was sort of... A few folks were saying, "Well, we're entering into a witch hunt atmosphere," as if the powerful men like Harvey Weinstein were themselves the victims, were themselves the witches accused of crimes they did not commit, right. So witch hunt has started to be used in modern parlance, not in the way that Arthur Miller used it in "The Crucible" to talk about something like the McCarthy-era trials, and not in the way that sometimes people used it to describe the Soviet show trials that led to a number of people being killed. Those things were broadly unjust. But now it's become a way to sort of position someone who might be committing injustice as the victim, to say, "This crime didn't happen, and I am totally innocent."

So do I think it's the wrong way of using it? Probably yes, because it ignores the power dimensions that are embedded in the witchcraft trials themselves. And it's particularly problematic, I think, when you remember that the witch hunts primarily targeted women, women tended to be the victims of that. And a lot of folks now who claim to be the victims of witch hunts are men who themselves have used their own power at times against women. So it's become very complicated in that way.

Ruth Candler 24:39
The last question I'll ask on witch hunts goes back to "The Crucible," as well as your academic research. How did Calvinist theology justify and employ witch hunts in places like the U.S. and Scotland?

Mikki Brock 24:53
So what is it about Calvinist theology that leads to such memorable, interesting witch hunts? So the first thing that I'll say to start off is that Protestants and Catholics hunted witches at about the same level. But there are some interesting dynamics of Calvinist theology that shaped the witch trials in those regions.

So, Scotland is Calvinist, New England is broadly Calvinist. And those are both communities that are tremendously invested in godly purity, right, becoming this city upon a hill, and looking within to root out any of those who might seek to subvert that principle. So for Calvinists, often I think the project of witch hunting is as much about self-purification as it is about preservation of society, because there really is this need to present oneself as the elect, as the new Israel, and to make sure there are no sort of wolves within their midst that could disrupt the sort of path towards godly life. And certainly, as well, there's a lot of anxiety about the devil in Calvinist communities, but they don't believe that the devil can impact salvation, right? Because they believe in double predestination. It's, you know, prior to the creation of the world that God determines who's saved and who is damned. So the devil can't actually affect salvation.

But what he can do is tempt the godly, is use the reprobate against the godly, and most Calvinists thought that those who were eventually convicted of witchcraft probably were the reprobate, were lost to God from the very outset, and needed to be eradicated for that reason. So this very black and white view of the world — reprobate, elect, God, devil — was a framing device for so much of Calvinist thinking about all of this. And I — last thing I'll say about that — Calvinists were also very obsessed with the demonic pact. And you might ask why? And the answer is that it's an inversion of the covenant that they believe that they made with God, which was at the center of their theology.

Ruth Candler 26:53
So I'd like to change course a bit and talk about the devil and Satan. What function has the devil served in Christian theology? And do you think that a belief in Satan has in any way changed the course of history?

Mikki Brock 27:08
Yeah, I do think it has changed the course of history, which is probably why I'm spending so much time studying it, much to, sort of, the surprise of some of my family members, you know, who always say, "You can study that? Can you really get a Ph.D. in studying demonology?" I can. And I did. No, but, you know, so, one of the things that's always been so interesting to me about the concept of evil, and the devil as the personification of that concept, is the extent to which the devil becomes almost a black mirror for society, right, a repository for thinking about and understanding human evil, for thinking about and understanding the bad things that happen in the world, for demonizing one's opponents in a way that allows you to say, "Well, we are good and godly, and not that, and they are terrible and evil and servants of Satan."

So it almost becomes an organizing principle, a tool of negative self-definition, a way for the religious and the, sort of, those who control the religious levers of power to delineate what is proper and what is not. And one of the things that I think is really critical about all this is every society has had in-groups and out-groups, right? Every society across time and space has really thought about who the other
might be, who threats to their community might be. But what Christianity does, and what the role of the devil does in particular, is makes those who are others not just enemies of society, but mortal enemies. It makes them not just problems, but it makes them evil, right? So it adds an extra veneer of otherness.

The devil has really been a tool to do that, right, by associating one's enemies with Satan. And this has happened, you know, over and over again, countless times in history. And I think it's been a really powerful driver of a lot of really... a lot of really ugly things in history, but also some soul-searching, right, and also some really interesting and fascinating art and also so much of pop culture and all of those things. So, see, I think, I think the devil is really critical. The devil solves a problem that Christianity also needed solving, which is to say, "How can an all-good, all-powerful, all-benevolent, all-knowing God allow evil to exist?" Well, the devil helps provide that answer.

So how has the belief in the devil changed over time compared to God? One of the really interesting phenomena, at least that I can observe in modern-day Christianity in particular, is that, frankly, belief in the devil has fared far worse than belief in God. So most modern-day Christians, almost all of them, of course, all of them do believe in God. But among more progressive Christian groups, and here I'm thinking of sort of mainline Protestants and Catholics, a lot of them if you ask will say, "Well, God certainly exists," and they have a really strong conception of who God is and what God does. But the devil has been sort of relegated to the realm of symbolism. The devil is a stand-in for evil writ large in the world, or the devil is the darker side of humanity, as opposed to an actual, you know, actual being that in some ways is constantly at war with God and tempting men and women away from God. And that is really fascinating.

I always ask my students about this, you know. "If you feel comfortable telling me," I say to them, "and if you went to church growing up, did you hear that much about the devil? Did you hear that much about hell?" And almost to a person they usually say, "Not very much, actually, like, we didn't really talk about that. We usually just talked about God and heaven." So to me, that's a really interesting question, right? Does Christianity still fully make sense if you're willing to take away one major part of the equation for which there's, you know, robust scriptural evidence there? And I think it's partially because we've been, even if we don't realize it, really swayed by certain ideas about deism, right, that clockmaker theory that God has sort of set the world in motion and stepped back. We don't really believe in an interventionist God so much, we tend to see both the beauty in the world and evil in the world as human creations. And so there's still a role for a creator God in that mindset. But the devil has less of a role, particularly once you really start to think about evil as something that's human, rather than unhuman, than supernatural or preternatural.

**Ruth Candler 31:34**
Yeah, well, then how do you, in Christianity, define evil?

**Mikki Brock 31:38**
Most people would probably say as absence from God or rejection of God, or sometimes I know plenty of modern-day Christians who will say, "Well, actually, evil is a product of, you know, neurological, chemical imbalances in one's brain," that it's not actually something that exists, you know, separate from our material bodies. So there's been that real decline.
And it's, and that's, I should say that's a decline in the Western world, it's declined in Europe, and in the U.S., but at the same time, there's been a rise in interest in parts of Latin America, and also some parts of Europe in things like exorcism, right? The current pope talks about the devil more than any other pope in history. Well, I should say, not in history, but in modern history. And that's partially because he is from a place and a tradition that is interested in things like the devil and exorcism. So even the pope that we tend to construe as quite progressive actually is very interested in the devil. And there have been actually more people trying to register as trained exorcists in the past five or six years than there was even before, which is really interesting. So I should say, the decline of the devil isn't the same everywhere, but certainly in the U.S. and parts of western Europe the devil is pretty dead, except for in art, and in our popular imagination.

Ruth Candler 32:55
So I'm going to go back to witches for a second. And there are many representations of witches today, but most of them aren't frightening at all. When I was growing up, it was the TV show "Bewitched," and in the '90s, it was the show "Charmed," and now there's the new Netflix hit "Sabrina." And all of these shows feature witches who are the good guys in the series. And it's interesting that witches have gone from being objects of fear and loathing to objects of desire, and surprisingly, perhaps the embodiment of freedom and female empowerment. How do you feel about this change? And what do you think it says about our culture?

Mikki Brock 33:33
Yeah, I think that first I'll say that's been a really long, slow process. You know, people were really terrified of witches for centuries, except for, I should say, some skeptics who did question whether or not witchcraft actually existed in this demonic version. There were always skeptics in the 16th and 17th century. But the vast majority of people were fearful of them, even after the witch trials ended, and the last major witch trial is in the 1720s. And after that ends, there are still, you know, extrajudicial witch killings. There are still in Europe a lot of ordinary people who believe in the threat of witchcraft, you know, well into the 20th century.

So it's been a long evolution, a long sort of chipping away at this stereotype of a fearful demonic witch. And I think part of, actually, what's really influenced that is an erroneous school of thinking that has argued that early modern witches were actually those who were practicing an underground fertility cult. This is the Margaret Murray thesis. She's a sort of Egyptologist, anthropologist who wrote about this in the 1920s. And she argues, I think it's the 1920s, she argues that there really was this underground pagan fertility cult and the witches who are accused of witchcraft in the early modern period were actually just those who are practicing that secret religion. That's bogus. That's... There's no evidence for that. It's... it's sort of a rubbish theory. She totally misuses evidence. But her thesis has been really compelling, actually, in fueling both modern-day Wiccanism, but also this idea that witch hunting was about trying to kill off this sort of female-led movement, this underground female-led fertility cult.

And that, I think, actually has been really powerful in the 20th century in changing our views of witches. I think also, frankly, you know... The reason I say, by the way, that it's bogus, is because witchcraft was
an imagined crime, right? Demonic witchcraft was a totally imagined crime. Fifty thousand people died for something that was made-up.

**Ruth Candler 35:39**
Fifty thousand.

**Mikki Brock 35:40**
Yeah. Fifty thousand people in Europe between, you know, roughly the very end of the 17th, or end of the, sorry, the end of the 15th century, and beginning of the 1700s. Yeah, 50,000 people we know met their deaths, and they died for an imagined crime, right. There may have been a few folks who dabbled in magic, but no one was going to giant, you know, satanic orgies and entering into pacts with the devil and so forth. Obviously, it's partially beyond the realm of proof. But there's also patently no evidence.

And I think there's been this real desire in the modern world to think that that was actually about something. You know, everybody wants to think that there, well, there must have been a there there, right? There must have been something underground that they were going after, this surely could not have been, you know, a fantasy of the learned elites. But it actually was, you know, it actually was.

So there's this powerful, movable, useful fiction, and it lands in the witch trials, it gets combined with certain aspects of gender, and becomes a sort of terrible and fearful thing. And I think, I almost think one of the reasons we've decided to strip witches of those meanings and see them as sort of fine or interesting or just practitioners of magic, not that big of a deal, or even representatives of this underground female-led fertility cult, is because we don't want to grapple with the capacity of humans to come up with something so horrible, and commit something so awful.

And I think it's a fantasy... It's a movable, useful fiction, this idea of an anti-human society in league with Satan committing things like cannibalistic infanticide and harmful magic and so on. That idea about witches is derived in so many ways from ideas about heretics in the 12th and 13th centuries, right, that there are these sort of heretical groups engaged in satanic activity. And those ideas about heretics are largely derived from fantasies about Jewish communities, blood libel, and all these other anti-Semitic tropes. And hey, those ideas are some charges that early Christians were accused of by Roman authorities. But of course, that capacity is with us. If you read about the QAnon conspiracies, for example, and Pizzagate, at the very core of those is the same thing that's at the core of the satanic panic of the 1980s, it's the same thing at the core of the witch trials. It's this usable, moveable fiction, a way for a community to define itself by who it's fighting, and what it's not.

**Ruth Candler 38:06**
Well, let's talk about the classes you teach on this topic. What seems to drive your students' interest in witchcraft and the dark arts? Is it merely morbid curiosity? Or does our cultural interest in witchcraft represent something important about the history of our society?

**Mikki Brock 38:24**
Yeah, so, I think one of the reasons students sign up for a class like this, especially at a place like Washington and Lee, is that it's weird, right? They think of it, "Well, we're at a liberal arts college, right?
And when else am I gonna have the chance to study something like Satan?” Or I teach the History of the Devil class or, you know, Age of the Witch Hunts, or my History of Ghosts class. So it’s, I think, for some folks, actually, frankly, it's, "Well, I'm going to be an accounting major. So here's my one chance to take something really weird and kooky and have some good cocktail party chatter, you know, when we can have cocktail parties again.

And so I think that's part of it. But also, I mean, there's a reason why any TV show that has the supernatural in it becomes really popular and a big hit, why every year there are movies made about demons and witches and ghosts and all that. And I think it's partially because even though we exist in a world that we... that is, quote unquote "modern," right, that is a world that we tend to think of as relatively secular — even if you're a spiritual person, that can get fairly compartmentalized — we don't tend to see our world as suffused with all of these unseen forces. But I do think there are still things that we encounter in our everyday lives that are beyond explaining, that for us provide challenges to slotting them into our sort of typical explanation, scientific explanations, explanations of how we think the world exists and operates, and I think that little piece of us that still recognizes that there are some things that maybe lie beyond human comprehension sparks this real interest in the supernatural, in witches and ghosts and things that go bump in the night.

Because it challenges us, too, to recognize that maybe our perceptions of humanity aren't the limits, aren't the hard limits. And that maybe there's something more, right. I think there is this almost this human yearning for this, for the mystical and the magical, for a world beyond the mundane and tangible. And so that drives a lot of that, I think.

Ruth Candler 40:36
Last summer, in the alumni college, you taught in a course focusing on the nature of evil that was very well attended by alumni, parents and friends of the university. I know the subject matter is popular with students. Were you surprised that it was so popular with adult minds as well?

Mikki Brock 40:54
Yes. I was also surprised y'all let me do it! I loved being part of all these alumni colleges. And I should say, for any listeners, this was a dream project that I helped convince Rob Fure to let me organize, and it was, you know, I was, I was surprised.

And I also wasn't, because from what I've learned of years of having W&L alumni audit my courses, for example, is they're just as curious as our students, right, they still have fundamentally unanswered questions about the world and about themselves and about society that they're pursuing in a whole range of ways. And I think evil in particular is a subject that everyone thinks about, at some point. You know, the idea of evil is personal, but it's also universal. So it has this mass appeal, and everyone can engage with it, because everyone has some experience of what they think it might be. So I'm really not surprised. Instead, I was just really gratified. There were really great conversations. That was one of my favorite weekends of the year when we did that.

Ruth Candler 41:55
As you mentioned, you have taught in a few of our alumni college programs. As an educator, how does teaching in alumni college differ than teaching in a traditional college classroom?

Mikki Brock  42:10
You know, it's less different than I would think. So I'll start with the similarities. W&L students are fantastic, W&L alumni are fantastic in their sort of ideas that they want to explore in those sorts of settings. So one commonality, actually, is the breadth of questions that I get, and the willingness to engage with the material. And I think that's partially because my courses, none of them are requirements for graduation. So students opt in; they take them because they want to. And so, too, with the alumni who sign up for these really interesting alumni college programs. They're interested in the subject, they're enthusiastic, they want to join in.

But I think it is different in that, in some ways, we're almost more on equal footing as sort of citizens of learning exploring a topic. And the reason I say that in terms of the alumni is that I'm not giving them a grade, you know, they don't have to take a test. They don't have to turn in a paper. So the conversations can be really gratifying because there's a greater degree of freedom, there's no desire to give me the answer that they think I want. So instead, I can really learn how they're interpreting the material that we're talking about. And there's a greater sort of flexibility in asking some of those questions, which is always exciting. I like to be surprised by what people ask me.

Ruth Candler  43:26
Well, Mikki, this discussion about the supernatural has been very interesting. Thank you. Before we wrap up, though, I would like to take a few minutes and move to a lighter and a more personal conversation so that our listeners can learn more about you. So as a scholar of witch hunts, Satan and demonology, what is your favorite thing to do at Halloween?

Mikki Brock  43:50
Well, I love all things fall. Fall is my absolute favorite season. And I... You know, I'm well above the age of going trick-or-treating, and I don't have kids, so on Halloween, I usually like to get together with friends and maybe watch a scary movie. And because I love all things fall, it's an opportunity for me to force everyone to consume pumpkin beer and candy corn and burn pumpkin spice candles, which if we're being honest, I've been doing that since late August already. However, it's a real moment for me to exercise my love of fall, and sometimes bore my friends with some of the material that we've been talking about today. So honestly, it's just staying home, cozying up and indulging in that.

Ruth Candler  44:34
Do they make you tell witch stories on Halloween?

Mikki Brock  44:37
I think my husband is very sick of hearing witch stories. I think he wouldn't necessarily want that. So usually, no, usually we focus on other sorts of things. Yeah.
So you've spent a lot of time in Scotland. If I were visiting Scotland for the first time, where would you tell me that I must visit?

Mikki Brock 44:57
Two... three places. I'll go with three places. Edinburgh, which is my favorite city in the world. I was actually there last year when I was on sabbatical, and it was amazing. I was a fellow at the University of Edinburgh. And I loved it. It's, you know, it's a city that's born of largely the time period that I study. So if you walk down the cobblestone streets of the Old Town, you see buildings that were frequented by the Scottish reformers who show up in my map in the Scottish Reformation project. I can show you the spots in the city center where witches were executed. So I... It's a city that, for me, that's very alive with history. And it's also a city that actual people live in. I always really recommend that if you go to Edinburgh, go out of the city center and go up to Stockbridge, which is north of the New Town, and is a really beautiful, quaint little village. But... Less a village, almost more sort of suburban, but it's really lovely and has all sorts of interesting shops and so forth.

I'd also really encourage folks to go to Glasgow. People think that Edinburgh is the only thing that represents Scotland in some ways, but Glasgow is a city on the west of Scotland, and it's much more sort of working class, but in some ways, it's also much more vibrant. There's much more of a nightlife. There are not so many tourists, so you actually get a sense of real Scottish people doing real things. Brilliant accents. It's definitely, if you like music and the arts, that's where to go. The theatre and the music there is really phenomenal.

And then I would say go up to the Highlands and go to a little town called Glenelg. It is my absolute favorite place in all of Scotland. It's a Highland town, tiny town that is just on the coast on the mainland across from Skye, Island of Skye. And it is a just unbelievably magical place. I took students there on a study abroad trip a couple of years ago, and it was one of the best experiences that I've ever had. But it's... It's a magical place. That's all I'll say about it, you must go. There's also lots of fairy lore in that area that you could read about. So those are... Get a taste of all of Scotland.

Ruth Candler 46:57
Wonderful. Thank you. So you live a half hour up the road from Lexington in the town of Staunton. And you're not the only W&L faculty member that has made that choice. It has so much to offer. What is your favorite restaurant and your go-to order?

Mikki Brock 47:14
Oh, this is tricky. I really like Staunton Thai. So I often get quite a bit of Thai food. Sometimes I get pad woon sen, sometimes I get drunken noodle, sometimes I get pad thai, so I quite like noodle dishes there. For nicer food, The Shack is amazing. And there's no... I mean, their burger is great, and we do often get that, but the menu changes so much and it's all this fresh, seasonal local food. So I love that place.

Ruth Candler 47:40
It's so quaint.
Mikki Brock 47:41
Oh, it’s fantastic. It’s really interesting, very laid back. What I love about all the restaurants in Staunton, even the nicest ones, like The Shack or Zynodoah, which is also wonderful, are very chill. So everyone, you can come as you are, come in jeans, whatever. And I really like that lack of formality in the dining scene in Staunton.

Ruth Candler 47:59
When you’re not on campus, what is your favorite thing to do in and around Staunton?

Mikki Brock 48:05
Lately, it’s been work. [Laughter] I don’t know. I don’t know if that counts. No, um, I like to run. I don’t do it competitively or anything, but just for fun. So there are lots of unfortunately hilly routes in Staunton but that are very beautiful. So there’s some nice running paths. And I like to do that. Mostly, it’s, I mean, lately, it’s hard for me to even remember the before times in Staunton just because I was in Scotland from September. And then I came back, you know, and immediately had to quarantine. So I have to say, lately it’s been hanging out in my friends’ backyards, you know...

Ruth Candler 48:40
Six feet apart...

Mikki Brock 48:40
Six feet apart. Exactly. So very socially distant. But that really is a favorite thing to do there. In some ways, actually, it’s interesting, I feel like my life isn’t as rooted in Staunton as you might imagine, because I spend so much time here and on campus. I love to go to Charlottesville, I should say we go to Charlottesville almost every weekend. I’m a city person, I actually don’t really like small towns, although they have their charms, no doubt. But I really enjoy a bigger city. So we get to Charlottesville and even better Richmond or D.C. as often as we can just to be in a place that might have a little bit more diversity, a bit more to try, a bit more to see, those kinds of things.

Ruth Candler 49:18
So you mentioned that you were a runner. Do you have a favorite spot in either Lexington or Staunton to run?

Mikki Brock 49:23
Definitely it’s going to be the Chessie Trail if I’m in Lexington, because it’s flat. [Laughter] I’m always on the quest for, like, a flat route. In Staunton, actually, there is... If you take Spring Hill Road, which I live quite by Spring Hill Road, if you just take it all the way, after three or four miles it really gets into countryside. So I like that, trying to find some country roads that do have a little bit of flatness if I get far enough out, if I’m willing to run that far. Usually in that case I have my husband pick me up because I don’t feel like running back if I’ve gone too far.

Ruth Candler 49:56
We just discovered the Chessie Trail and walking from one end to the other, and it’s just beautiful.
Mikki Brock  50:02
Yeah, yeah, it's lovely.

Ruth Candler  50:04
So when you're running, do you listen to music, podcasts or the sound of your feet hitting the pavement?

Mikki Brock  50:11
I could never do the latter because that would be way too Zen, which is not really my style. So I always have to have something in my ears. I don't actually really listen to music — I listen to music all the time when I'm working and writing, I always write to music with words — but I tend to run to podcasts. I listen to a lot of, like, political podcasts, or I'll listen to audiobooks. I'm an avid reader, I love to read. I don't usually have a lot of time in term to sit down and read a hard copy of a book. So audiobooks provide a really nice way to get sucked into something really juicy.

I'm listening to Fredrik Backman's newest book. It's called "Anxious People." So Fredrik Backman is a Swedish writer, and he wrote "A Man Called Ove" and "Beartown" and he's just... He writes really kind of light, but also quite deep books about the human condition really, and they're often very funny and tongue-in-cheek so I'm listening to that. I'm really enjoying it.

Ruth Candler  50:42
So what are you listening to now? Staunton's Blackfriars Playhouse is the world's only exact replica of Shakespeare's indoor theater. And it is in the fabulous town of Staunton. It's a gorgeous venue for theatre. Have you attended any shows there?

Mikki Brock  51:21
I have. Yeah.

Ruth Candler  51:22
Is "Macbeth" your favorite, perhaps?

Mikki Brock  51:22
Actually "Macbeth" is my favorite. [Laughter] So I saw a really, really good — a couple of years ago — a really, really good production of "Merchant of Venice," and I love that play as well. But yeah, "Macbeth" has to be my favorite, partially because, so, "Macbeth" is written in 1606. And Shakespeare is writing for James VI and I of Scotland. So, that is to say the new king of the united British crown, James VI of Scotland, James I of England. He had, of course, himself, been involved in a number of witch hunts. So undoubtedly, Shakespeare is writing for his audience. And you can't get really a better character than Lady Macbeth, who I would argue is herself a bit of a witch figure.

Ruth Candler  52:04
Mikki, you've been teaching at W&L now for six years. What is your favorite memory of your career here?
Mikki Brock  52:12
Oh, wow. Okay, I have a lot of really good memories. But I think probably the best didn't actually happen here. But with my students that I took to Scotland, back in, I think it was the summer of 2018. And we went to Glenelg, this little Highland town. And for their final project, they had to put on a ceilidh. And we tend to think of ceilidhs as dances, right? Scottish dances. But the traditional ceilidh, the way that they did ceilidhs for centuries up in the Highlands and still do, is a sharing project where you bring to it a song or a little play or a poem or a personal story. And everyone shares and everyone sort of joins in that experience of being together and sharing and song and poetry and in their voices.

And we had our students perform one of these ceilidhs for the local village town hall and invited people from the community to come see that. So it was... It's hard to capture what that experience was like. The students dug really deep. They talked about their personal experiences. They talked about Scottish history, and the way that they had experienced it while being in Scotland, they sang, they did little plays, they really were vulnerable with each other and ourselves. And it was... There... I'll just say there was not a dry eye in the entire place, including among any of our students, by the time that was done. So it was a very proud moment.

Ruth Candler  53:33
Yeah. Sounds very special for the townsfolk, too.

Mikki Brock  53:36
Yeah. It really was. We had such a good group of students. I don't know if we'll ever be able to replicate it. But it was... I went with Professor Jemma Levy. So worth knowing that she was co-leading with me.

Ruth Candler  53:46
That sounds wonderful. Mikki, thank you so much for talking with us today.

Mikki Brock  53:50
Great. Thank you for having me.

Ruth Candler  53:52
And thanks as always to you for listening. We hope you've discovered something new. To read more about today's podcast and check out other ways to continue your lifelong learning with W&L, you can head to our website, wlu.edu/lifelong. You'll also find W&L's faculty reading list, "Sheltering in Place with a Few Good Books," and information on how to join our W&L book club. We hope you'll join us next time. Thanks again, and until then, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.