Marc E. Smith: Well, this is going to sound sappy, but it didn't come just from Frozen — err Frozen 2 — you know, it started with Frozen — that, you know, when I go to the movies — because I've gone to some of the audience previews, but I've also gone just to the general shows — and just to see, you know, all the kids dressed up in the outfits, and the parents even dressed up sometimes, and the fun that they're having together, and the discussions they're having after the movies, and the podcast that we're doing, that we're talking about the meaning of these films and how they relate to the world, like that's... Just to be part of that is something that I never forget and I don't take for granted.

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin Gioia Connors: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

Colin: Marc Smith works for Walt Disney Animation Studios and was the Director of Story for Frozen 2. He first joined Disney in 1993 and has worked on Treasure Planet, Tangled, Frozen, Big Hero 6, Zootopia, and most recently, Frozen 2.

Disney's Frozen was released in 2013 and quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. It won two Oscars for Best Animated Picture and Best Original Song, and became the highest grossing animated film of its time, earning an estimated 1.3 billion worldwide. Both the story design and visual design for Frozen drew heavily from Scandinavia: the story was inspired by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's The Snow Queen, the setting was inspired by the fjords of Norway, and the character costumes were inspired by the traditional dress of ethnic Norwegians and Sámi people, the bunad and the gákti.

Now six years later, Frozen 2 has opened to great commercial and critical success, bringing in $350 million in its opening weekend alone. The new film matures with both its characters and its audiences, as the core cast from the first film encounter new and different knowledge that re-examines their actions and experiences in both Frozen films. What do you do, the film asks, when you learn the truth?
Disney undertook a lot of new research for the film. The filmmakers traveled to Norway, Finland, and Iceland and consulted with artists, scholars, and cultural experts, myself included. Many of the cultural experts who consulted on the film production were Sámi, and the filmmakers signed agreements with Sámi representative bodies, including the Sámi Parliaments and the Sámi Council.

I sat down with Marc to discuss his role in the film, and how specifically their research trip to the Nordic countries influenced the film. Before we begin, you should know that we discuss a few specific scenes, including the climax of the film. If you haven't seen Frozen 2, you'll be able to follow along just fine, but if you are still avoiding spoilers, you might want to wait to listen to this episode. Alright Marc, you’re on.

Marc: Hi, I'm Marc Smith, I was the Director of Story for Frozen 2. So what a director of story does is I work really closely with the directors of the film, in this case Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, and early on in the film’s development, I work with them on just helping them to find the story that they want to tell, just help them dial in to what it is, you know, what it is that they feel is important. And yeah, we work on that for a little while and my job, as the movie progresses, transitions into storyboarding the film —or myself and, working with a team of storyboard artists, and the directors—we then take either ideas or, sometimes, scenes that are in script form, and we will visualize those in storyboard form. And then we will watch the movie, we will put up a whole version of the movie, take a look at it, we look at it with a big group of our peers here at the studio, and other directors, and everyone in the studio, really, gets a chance to see it and send notes back to us. And we'll do this between six and twelve times on any given film, we'll remake the movie, sometimes the whole thing from the ground up, in storyboard form. And we do this to try to find the story before the movie goes too far down into production.

It's just a really big collaboration, obviously led by our directors, and early on in the movie we spend a lot of time just sitting in a room and talking about the potential for the film. And you know, our songwriters are a huge part of the story. In any musical, you know—a good one anyway—the songs are actually doing a lot of the heavy lifting for story, and so Bobby and Kristen were a huge part, and we would meet with them in—they're based in New York, but we would meet with them over the computer machine [laughs*], and we would just talk story and would share script pages, sometimes we'd have storyboards to show them, sometimes they'd have ideas for a song, or we would be talking about one particular scene and they would say, “Hey, that's starting to feel like a song, and let's start developing that.” And so there was a big back and forth all the way, all across the time that we're working on these things, and again, it's very collaborative.

Colin: Yeah, I've heard the Lopezes speak in interviews that it's a very collaborative process back and forth, and that often they were aided in getting storyboards from you to help, kind of, flesh out the vision of where to go with the piece.

Marc: Yeah, it really is a chicken-and-egg thing. We will sometimes have an idea, and we'll send it off an artist to just do some exploration with, you know, a theme or an idea. And sometimes we'll take that back and just send that to Bobby and Kristen and hope that it sparks something, which it usually does, and then they'll maybe write a little melody or write a whole song or write a rough version of it. And they can record it right at their home recording studio, and one of them will actually sing it, and they'll send that back to us. And then we can look at it, the directors can give any notes, and, you know, if everyone's happy with it, then we'll have an artist—myself or another artist on the team—storyboard that sequence. And we look at it, we show Bobby and Kristen, and it goes back and forth and back and forth, and the directors and, you know, over the course of months sometimes, hopefully we'll get something that everyone is feeling pretty good about, and then you put that as one of the small pieces in the whole of the movie.

Colin: Well I've heard Disney people say that every story begins with research. Could you tell me about what research went into Frozen 2, and maybe how is it different from the research that went into the first Frozen film?

Marc: Well I think, in terms of the difference, you know, because it is—we know the characters already—the research of at least the
main characters, we didn't really need to do much research on that, other than a lot of thought and discussions about, you know, Anna and Elsa, Kristoff and Sven, and Olaf, all of them could actually go emotionally a little further, a little deeper. That was something the directors really were really excited about, the challenge of that for Frozen 2. As far as, like, the physical research that we did in order to find the story, we took an amazing trip in 2016, and we went to Norway and then to Finland and then on to Iceland. And that was really early in the development of the movie, but it had a huge, huge impact on where the movie ended up becoming.

When we went to—in Norway, I think, or Finland, we went to some really amazing forests that were very high north. And they just had such an enchanted feeling to them; you really understood why the cultures there, and the people there, have these tales of forest spirits and, you know, fairies and people living in the brush of the forest, because it felt so magical there when we were there. And it was pretty apparent that this, when we were in Finland and Norway in the forest, that this really felt like a fairytale setting, and that was very much like our character Anna, which was really interesting to us. Then when we got over to Iceland, Iceland was such a big mythic extreme dramatic landscape, it didn't take long to start to realize, “OK, this is Elsa's world.” And so we started to have these thematics of fairytale and myth, you know, myth being Iceland, fairytale being sort of a forest of Norway and Finland, and those lined up really well with the characters that we already have, like Anna in the forest and Elsa in Iceland.

Colin: Could you tell me about any of the places in particular, or people, that you met on those trips?

Marc: Sure, I mean, we spent quite a bit of time with the Sámi people in Norway, and they were, you know, hugely influential to the movie, you know. We have the Northuldra people in the film, and they were greatly inspired by the Sámi people, not just their clothes and the way they look, but, you know, just their actual stories and the way that they viewed the world and the way that they felt like they were a part of nature, and the respect and the reverence that they had for it, that was really influential. And then in Iceland, it was, you know, early on in the movie, we were thinking, “Well, what are the antagonistic forces for Elsa? She's so powerful, she's so—she can build ice castles and just has this incredible raw power.” And when we were in Iceland, just the landscape was so dramatic, that being in the face of the awesomeness of nature there, you feel small. You feel like a little tiny person that could be killed at any second, and it was, I think, when we were, or at least for me, one of the moments that was the most inspiring was when we were standing on the black rock beach in Iceland and seeing the waves and how dramatic and tumultuous they were, and the ocean and the wind and the sand blowing everywhere, and I remember thinking when we were there, like, “OK, now there's a formidable power that even Elsa, I think, would have trouble dealing with.” And so that really was the inspiration. We got back for a test sequence that we did, that became the teaser of the film, which was, you know, Elsa sort of running out into the waves—that was inspired by that beach in Iceland. Also in Iceland, you know, we got to walk on the glacier, and the glacier, you just had a sense of this awesome power. You just felt the ancient energy coming out of it, it's sort of hard to describe with words, but I think everyone that was on that trip felt that. And that was, you know, very much an inspiration for Elsa, you know, going home to a place like that. It became Ahtohallan.

Colin: I think that the story is just really wonderful, and I would say different from a lot of Disney films that I've seen before. I think Disney films are famous sometimes for having very memorable heroes, but also some really memorable villains. And Frozen 1 had this great twist in which the villain was revealed, but do you feel like there's really a villain in Frozen 2?

Marc: Well I don't think we have the typical villain in the sense that you're talking about. I think what sometimes is more interesting—you know, so there's great villains that I love, but sometimes, to mix things up, it's nice to have the challenge that the antagonistic force be something that comes from within. Really, most of the time when you watch a movie that's got a great villain, usually they do represent some sort of inner struggle with the character. In this one, I think we just really wanted to lean into the challenges that we face, just sort of inside of ourselves, you know? And where the girls are three years older in this movie that in the first one. Their lives are different, and we looked at, you know, “Where would—” I think Elsa's twenty-four and Anna's twenty-one, and we really thought about, “Well, what are the challenges that face young people at this age?” And one of those things is, you know, how do you know
where you're supposed to be? How do you know you're doing the right thing with your life? You know, you're looking out at a whole life and wondering, “Am I heading in the right direction?” That felt like enough of an antagonistic force, I think, for us to try to use that as the antagonism.

We also have, you know, elements of the grandfather and, you know, “the sins of our fathers,” and there's just some really interesting parallels to just real-world things happening with that, and so it was—I think that was an interesting sort of layer to the whole thing as well.

**Colin:** Yeah I like what you're saying, I think that illustrates a difference between fairy tales and myths, that often in fairy tales you'll have heroes and villains, but myths, and especially ancient myths, are about transitions in life, and it's not a story of good and evil always, its, “How do you get from one step to the next in your life?” And that comes with all kinds of challenges, and often those can be challenges from within, more than anything that is external.

**Marc:** Yeah, I mean, and the nice thing is that we had—we could do both with this, because we did have Elsa, who is this mythic character, that really does have to sort of figure out what her transformation is going to be, but we also have Anna, who very much is the fairytale character who definitely believes in the happy ending, you know, believes that the dragon can be slain, right? And it's nice that we have both of those sort of opposing worldviews, or different worldviews, that we could dramatize in the film.

**Colin:** Well it's good, it's a very relatable story, and I think that a lot of themes that come out of it, with the girls growing older, and sort of learning what it means to be a family when you get older, that you can move away, and that's still OK, and you can fight, and that's still OK, is one that speaks to a very wide audience. And this is obviously—I mean this story is obviously a fiction, Disney films are generally made for young audiences, but I've read several reviews that the film touches on real-world concerns and events right now, especially around climate change and the rights and futures of Indigenous peoples, which I think come through pretty strongly, and I'm curious just how purposeful was that, when you're writing a story for children?

**Marc:** Well, you know, we don't—none of us lives in a vacuum. So these stories that come out, and the, you know, the challenges that our characters face are always just mirrors of the stories that we face and the challenges that we face, you know, as a society. So I think, for me, to actually calculate, you know, trying to put a message in a movie or something doesn't usually work, you know. You feel it, it feels heavy-handed in that respect, and so it's usually better to me when our characters are faced with the same challenges that, you know, we are faced with as a society. And part of the interesting part of it is to watch how the characters handle those challenges.

**Colin:** Alright, this next question is going to be a personal one.

**Marc:** OK.

**Colin:** So prepare yourself.

**Marc:** [*laughs*]

**Colin:** How many times have you drawn Olaf?

**Marc:** [*laughs*] How many times have I drawn Olaf? Oh, I mean... It would be impossible to know, but...probably in the tens of thousands? [*laughs*]
Colin: Oh my goodness!

Marc: Remember, I worked on this movie for four years, and then I also worked on the first Frozen, so... So yeah, I've done my share of Olafs.

Colin: Yeah, so how many years in total have you been working on Frozen?

Marc: [*laughs*] On the franchise of Frozen, or on the Frozen world?

Colin: Yeah, yes, exactly.

Marc: I, let's see, well, four years on this movie, and I probably—I don't know exactly, I probably only worked on the first one about two years. Two or three years. [*laughs*] So... oh I don't know, I'm not good at math. [*laughs*] Something like that. It does feel like it's been, you know, cause even in the years in between, it's still around, it's still such a presence in our culture and in our world, and it feels like a long time. But I love these characters, I really do, and I did get emotional, the last drawing that I did of the girls.

Colin: Well yeah, to hear you talk about them, the characters sound very real, and they sound like family. You've spent years with them, and drawn them thousands of times, um.. What do you—I mean it sounds like they are always with you.

Marc: Yeah, they have to be. I mean, you have to sort of fall in love with them a little bit, even though you put them through horrible [*laughs*] horrible things. You have to sort of know them and know where they're coming from. And when you're working on a scene, you have to understand, you know, what's going on underneath in order to make sure that what they do is real and believable. And yeah, you feel sorry for them when you [*laughs*]—I felt, when I worked on the Anna song, "The Next Right Thing," and it was very emotional because, in her head, she lost her sister and she lost Olaf, and wow we really took her to a dark, sad place, and that was a rough couple of weeks, working on that scene, because I, you know, I really care for her and I felt horrible.

Colin: I cry every time I see that scene.

Marc: Oh! [*laughs sympathetically*] Yeah it's actually one of the scenes that I am most proud of in the film, because I think that it really does—I think that one really does take the movie to a place that not a lot of other films go. And, you know, to see one of our main characters be taken so so low, and, you know, generally at the end of a song or something, you know, they're back up and they're more positive, but in the case of "Next Right Thing," you know, she is back up, but she's still just sort of getting by by action. She's not—she doesn't know that Elsa and Olaf will be back, so, you know, it's a unique song, and I think a really powerful one, to me. I'm really proud of that moment in the film.

I don't think it's just for the older people, you know, they have—they probably come at it from a little different place, but even children, you know, they experience sadness, they experience, you know, despair, depression, and all these things, and, I think, to have a character that maybe they know or love be able to show them that it's OK, you know, to feel that way, that those feelings are valid, but that you still have to, you know, carry on, and you can still function, and it will go away eventually. I think that's a good lesson, really, for everyone.

Colin: You spend so much time with these characters. What do you do when you're not thinking about Frozen?

Marc: [*laughs*] I guess sleep? [*laughs*] Um... What do I do? I mean I have a family, and we do all the things that families do, and... the thing is, though, it's kind of hard, and they probably hate this part of things, but they're always getting pulled into whatever
film I'm working on, because they'll have a story or they'll have an experience, and I'll be like, "Oh, tell me about that!" And the next day, we work as a group a lot in the story room with the directors and all the story artists and one of the wonderful parts about the job is that it is, you know, kind of like a big therapy session in that we can all relate, you know, these personal stories and experiences that we have with our families and in our life and try to sort of assimilate those into the film, and so.. And so maybe the answer is, there's not much time in between [*laughs*] spent on thinking about anything else other than the film when we're working on it, but that's not always a bad thing.

**Colin:** Yeah, I understand that many of you are parents who have worked on this film. The credits list the number of new babies that were born during production, and the credits—it's very impressive, just the sheer number of people who help out with the film for this, and to know that you're all dedicating so much time for years.

**Marc:** Yeah, one of the nice things about it is that, you know, our story rooms are made up of people of all ages, people that are parents, people that aren't parents, people from different countries, you know, men and women and people from all different walks of life. And that's I think one of the sort of the magic of this place, is that we do have so many perspectives in that room where we work on these stories, and there are so many different artists that work on them and bring their own experiences. I think that's why the movies can go out into a world and relate to so many people. I think I just heard today that *Frozen 2*, just as we speak right now, they're estimating I think 158 million people have seen it at this point? And that's just mind-boggling to me, but we do, you know, and that's all over the world, we all connect to the emotional story of these characters, so.. Yeah, that's—it's a really interesting, amazing, and humbling number for me to hear.

**Colin:** It absolutely is. It's, I think— one of the wonderful things is being able to see that you can create something that touches so many people and can have a positive impact in their lives. So I was very touched, too, the first time I saw it, and to see my name in the credits up there, and just to know that I was a small piece of this.

**Marc:** Well good. You should be proud! [*laughs*]

**Colin:** It's a very good film, I am very proud. I think you guys did a tremendous job with it.

**Marc:** Well thank you. It's teamwork! You know, as an artist, being able to work on a film, or work on these movies, that can go out to 158 million people in the twenty-some days that it's been out, to have your work go out there, you know, and the work that you feel is meaningful, and know that it's going to be seen by so many people, it's just such a gift. It's, like, I'm blessed, and I'm grateful every day about being able to work on these films with the people that I get to work with. And so... so that's my experience here, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

[*Outro music starts*]

**Colin:** Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a course or declaring a major. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

[*Outro music ends*]
Colin: So in academia, after you work for six years, you usually take a sabbatical to kind of recharge your batteries.

Marc: Uh-huh.

Colin: Do you get sabbaticals?

Marc: I do, yeah, I already took mine. I had five weeks off, it was wonderful. I mostly just cleaned my garage.

[Second outro music starts]

[Second outro music ends]

SHOW NOTES

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This episode was written, edited, and produced by Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Kristian Næsby.

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