

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

And this is Steven Sheil, a filmmaker in the UK who specializes in horror.

SS: When I was growing up my first exposure to horror was video nasty era there this was moral panic on VCR where suddenly people realize horror seen in privacy of own home, and so campaign by conservative Christian crusader backed by politicians lead to creation of act of parliament prosecuted so created list of films that weren't allowed to be, prosecuted under obscene films act, I Spot in Your Grave, Cannibal Holocaust, there were raids on video shops, cease copies of film on list. It was kind of crazy.

And it completely backfired.

SS: But what it did do it made horror films seem like transgressive, dangerous mind warping thing and when you're a kid something like that is immensely attractive, this thing is dangerous? I can't have it in my house? Great!

CLIP

SS: Some friend of yours his Dad would know guy in pub third generation copy of Evil Dead watching through sock because so many time iterations, re-recorded so many times, you could barely see anything, the roll over and interference made it seem even more transgressive, this is something you shouldn't watch, this isn't like cinema where it's big, glossy, SFX, this is something rough, low budget, and video and it's grimy and it's right there.

But Steven didn't have to hide his horror tapes from his parents.

SS: I remember first got VCR one of the first movie my Dad brought home was Halloween we were well under 18, it was great, terrifying, brilliant and we must have watch that a couple times a week for a month.

A few months ago, Steven contacted me on Facebook to ask if I would consider doing something on modern horror since I've mostly dealt with the classics like Dracula and Frankenstein, and I did that episode about why I'm afraid of zombies. I told him the problem is I don't watch a lot of horror because, you know, it scares me. I'm still working up the courage to see Get Out. I know I'm a total wimp because that movie is so critically acclaimed.

But Steven directed me towards an article he wrote in defense of horror – not just as a genre with psychological and sociological depth, but as a way to process personal grief. I had never heard that take on horror before. So I asked him to tell me more.

SS: There is definitely a archetype of horror film which starts with the point where someone lost someone close to them, it's a long time ago but Nick Rhodes Don't Look was one of the early versions, where it starts with death of young daughter of a couple. It's such a raw moment at the beginning where Donald Sutherland races down to this pond at the end of this garden sees daughter in pond red coat, wades in there, there's this rising up with her in arms, and this howl of grief on his face.

When he was younger, Steven didn't make this connection between grief and horror. But now it seems obvious to him.

SS: My getting into filmmaking coincided with death of first sister, so my sister Tina, had suffered from epilepsy, she had a brain tumor and had chemo, and it left her with a small amount of brain damage, but she was severely epileptic, had massive fit in my parents' house and died, and it was a massive shock for all of us, for me, it came out of nowhere, and it was suddenly like, it's hard to describe but she was older than me, she was 12 years older, when someone there whole life taken away like that in an instant, was very hard to deal with.

At the same time, Steven was delving further into horror culture. He started a horror festival in his hometown, and that eventually lead to the creation of his first feature film.

SS: My first film Mum and Dad was a film that was essentially set in a place a mile from where I grew up, I grew up near Heathrow Airport, so my first film murderous family who live at end of airport runway, send adopted children to find people to bring back to torture and kill.

Obviously the murdering part wasn't autobiographical, but some of the other details were.

SS: I gave the title characters terrible killers same job as my parents, to me that was working with what you know, and I knew my parents were okay, and they saw film and they thought it was funny.

But there were other aspects of the film, which came from his life, that weren't so obvious. When his sister Tina was first diagnosed with a brain tumor, the doctor told Steven's father that she wouldn't live beyond the age of 30. His father never told the rest of family about that diagnosis until after she died.

SS: That was a bit of a shock to all of us, because it was this secret that had been kept from us I knew reasons for my Dad doing that, I knew there was a protective and man of the house idea behind doing that, but at the same time it felt like oh my God this whole thing that I didn't know about. And so writing film about family that has secrets on surface, are normal family have jobs but have secrets hidden away that was something that definitely feed into Mum and Dad.

Hi film "Mum & Dad" came out in 2008 – a quarter century after the panic over slasher films. But in some ways, Steven felt like nothing had changed. He had grown up to create a "video nasty."

SS: I wanted to make something make audiences feel when I saw Texas Chainsaw, which is it made me feel a little dirty after watching it, there's something within celluloid of film that's so grimy, grubby and permeates every part of it. A lot of people who were into horror liked it, a lot of people didn't like it. (laugh) There had been a case about a serial killer couple Fred and Rosemary West, although I hadn't based some elements of their story that were, basis there's Mum and Dad family of killers similar to their case, a couple newspapers picked up on that and because BBC put money, wrote headlines, also BBC put money, BBC funds horror porn, and on personal reaction I remember had first screening at home cinema, I didn't sit in to watch it going back to see how it was guy came down stairs with face like thunder, he looked at me and said what is going on inside your head?

He gets that reaction a lot.

SS: Especially when people ask you the question in a way that suggest that being into horror is something they can't understand, and something that is perverse, and marks you out as having something unsavory in your head, there's this idea unsavory, that you love violence, blood, death, I kept hearing or feeling this response from people and so I started that's not the case. For me that's not the case at all. For me it feels like the landscape of horror films is like landscape of grief, it feels like this idea that death is this implacable relentless force it just comes out of nowhere and can completely destroy your life, feels like I recognize that, that's happened to me.

In fact, he feels like death is a horror movie killer that won't leave his family alone.

SS: In 2011 my other sister Colleen died, lung infection complications, coma and died a week later and the year after my Dad had similar thing where he had lung disease and died from that.

Once again, horror became part of his grieving process.

SS: I think it's something people have misapprehension about horror films which is gore, how can you watch all that gore? How can you watch arms getting chopped off and intestines being pulled out? That desire is not a desire to create violence but it is an acceptance of the mutability of the body the idea body can succumb to violence and disease and it is quite fragile.

SS: For my sister Colleen and Dad I had the chance to visit in funeral home before funeral, first sister Tina I didn't visit her because it was too upsetting to imagine doing that but when other sister died I decided to do it because I wanted to see her and I wanted to have that experience of seeing her now, post death, to make it real that this body isn't the person.

SS: I think what's happened last 20 years post-Scream certain rules, you have sex you die but I think with horror movies what's interesting is that death can come out of nowhere, and can happen to anyone.

SS: And for me death is always violent. Whether somebody dies road accident or someone dies peacefully in bed their removal from your life violent act changes your life fundamental way, and often times some of the most iconic figures in horror are these remorseless, implacable, faceless killers Michael Myers, Jason, they're there no way of escaping them even if you escape on movie their will be a sequel.

SS: For me horror films are fundamentally about massive questions -- two of the big questions that horror are about are why do people hurt one another and what happens after we die? I can't understand people not interested in exploring those questions. When people say they can't watch horror, it's like what's wrong with you? So I guess after years of people looking at me as if wrong looking at people what's wrong with you?

In a moment, we'll meet someone who also uses horror as a different form of therapy – not to get through a tragedy, but to remember it. That's just ahead, after the break.

>> BREAK

When I was talking with Steven Sheil, he directed me towards an article from The New Yorker about mourning and horror. So I called the author, Aaron Orbey. At one point, I asked about his career as a writer and Aaron said, well right now I'm a sophomore at Yale. I was like – wait – what? You're a college student? He sounded so mature and professional.

And even though Aaron is going to college parties, he gets the same reaction Steven Sheil gets when he tells people about his favorite genre. In other words, horror is a conversation killer.

AO: It sort of bothers me because it's not a well thought out perspective, I think there is people who don't want to watch movies I think there's a way the genre is critically condescend to, they think bad and don't recognize how movies intellectually or emotionally gratifying for people and so I might think when people kind of scoff at the subject oh well I could say no, I'm not a weirdo likes bad things, and I'm interested from an intellectual perspective because my Dad was murdered and that's the most off putting thing you could say to someone.

Aaron grew up in Massachusetts but his family is Turkish. They would go back to Ankarah every summer. And one year:

AO: I was 3 about to turn 4 and my parents went out to celebrate anniversary, the timing was eerie, and my father that night was murdered by an intruder who happened to be there, I think the story is he had robbed someone else's house and looking for somewhere to hide, at the time we were living on the first floor, he was able to jump up and get in there, my father hearing something what was up and he surprised the guy who shot him. I was in the apartment.

You were 3?

AO: Apt. I was with my older sister 9 years senior. And we were hiding.

Remember it?

AO: In flashes, told story for personal reasons and I'm a writer, but it's one of those memories that doesn't exist wholly for me and that still fascinates me and disturbs me a lot.

When hiding, did your sister hide you or did you know to hide yourself?

AO: My sister hid me, she took me and we hid in the closet.

Aaron didn't fully understand what happened to his father. Given how young he was, no one was in a rush to tell him the horrible details.

AO: I knew my father was dead and I knew the circumstances but I remember I happen to stumble on something my sister wrote, a few years after my sister applied to college she wrote an essay about my father and I remember I saw it on our computer and sort of seeing what happened, the event condensed down to a few sentences just shocked me, I hadn't registered that someone entered our house and killed too, it's something I had known and avoided from a more mature perspective.

And his sister -- who protected during the robbery -- continued to be protective of him over the years. One of his earliest memories is watching a crime drama and seeing a dead body on screen. His sister and her friend physically turned Aaron around so he couldn't see the TV, which only made him more curious. And then:

AO: I remember watching Panic Room with Jodie Foster not really a horror film but that was another movie that I remember watching and being intrigued by and also I wasn't supposed to watch it, my first access was on family vacation where my sister and I were in room alone in the hotel room and we watching previews for Pay Per View and I remember my sister upset preview for movie because Panic Room mother hiding with daughter and sister turn it off immediately and I remember beings surprised, going back to TV when she was in shower and she heard it and was surprised I was trying to watch this movie.

But thrillers weren't enough. He wanted something scarier, more disturbing. He found a horror channel on cable, and he watched it every moment he could.

AO: And also because of the familiar circumstances of my mom worked hard and is source of support, I was home alone, access to TV, could turn on TV and watch, and watch something scary go to purchase history and delete, I didn't want to be found out but I wanted to understand and process what happened and watch movies without hurting or disturbing my mother because for her and sister who also experienced it they wanted to forget, but for me, because I had experienced it and witnessed it but also been so

shielded because I was young I had still more investigating to do before I could forget it, it's almost like I was told to forget something that I hadn't fully experienced and so I wanted it to come clear to light, and as a child I often thought watch something bring it all clearly into my mind and after that deal with forgetting, but until then I wanted to watch more and more and see how far into fear I could take myself.

But he never found that moment -- that perfect horror film which could make him fully experience the terror of that night, which is buried deep into his subconscious.

AO: I'm still interested in watching those movies or relieved not sure habit or still searching probably more habit for me at this point or if it's because I'm still searching for something. And being able to watch that calms myself in a weird way.

Some people are freaked out, what are you going through?

AO: The answer is two fold, first because really enjoying horror movies is weird to a lot of people and strikes as bizarre or perverted, occasionally I'm pleased to remember that the violence affects me and it does disturbs me.

You're not desensitized.

AO: Yes. And there's sense it's relieving to think how terrible and feel shocked by violence as I imagine someone who hadn't experienced happened to my father would be.

Although he disagrees with Steven Sheil that horror is terrifying because death could strike anyone. Aaron finds comfort in the conventions of the genre. In fact, he thinks dramas like Manchester by the Sea are more disturbing because people can die for no apparent reason, like in real life.

AO: The job of horror film is to convince you is that what's happening believable enough to shock you but unbelievable enough to keep you secure in your distance, it would be very disconcerting if a horror film showed lecture hall and shooter entered and kill people because they were there. Always indemnifying factor, someone was curious, went out to see the source of a sound.

The closest Aaron got to a feeling a sense of closure happened when he saw The Babadook, an Australian film about a woman and her son who are haunted by a monster after the husband is killed in a car crash. Normally,

Aaron sees these films alone or with friends. In this case, he wanted to bring his sister.

AO: I had told her about it and wanted to see it with understanding critically acclaimed horror film and looked good and there were ways circumstances overlapped with lives that shocked and surprised me, that I felt guilt that I had brought sister, and being in the theater at end we sat there shocked by what had happened and as everyone got up, there was this weird sense maybe they didn't understand as we had.

Your sister is there and she's protective but you're protective of her. Often in horror person you want to protect.

AO: Yeah. I do hesitate to bring anyone into this same theater spaces as me if I'm going to watch movie give me some cheap thrill and maybe part of reason has to do with the sense I'm trying to access this part of me that feels missing and to her it's not missing because she was so conscious during my father's death so idea I would implicate her in my own viewing experience feels sick because to her it feels so much realer even though event happened to us separate us as viewers of same movie.

In my own experience, one thing that took me a while to realize after losing someone is that I would keep making new memories after that loss, and how over time my relationship with that person would become a smaller portion of my overall life experience. Over time, it takes effort to keep that person's memory alive, and sometimes that effort can become a whole other part of your life, and evolve into something new.

That's happened to Aaron with horror films. And he's okay with that.

AO: There's a way in which experience of what happened to my Dad central to my identity and so because it's part of my identity, and I think the horror films are a part of my identity.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Aaron Orbey, Steven Sheil, Bernice Murphy, Caitlin Benson-Allot and Aviva Briefel.

Do you also find horror movies cathartic, beyond the fun thrills? You can join the conversation on Facebook, I tweet at emolinsky. You can help support the show on Patreon, just click the donate button on my site, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.

Next week, I'm going to continue along similar lines in looking at the relationship between real life murders and fictional ones – one particular fictional death in a little town called Twin Peaks.