

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

**This week is Thanksgiving in the U.S., which always kicks off with the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.**

*HODA: The parade is all in its way, there is so much to look forward to. We got Tom Turkey, we got Santa Claus, and we have everything in between.*

**One of the reasons kids love to watch the parade is because of the balloons. There are balloons of Snoopy, SpongeBob, Paw Patrol. And there's a new balloon in the lineup this year: Monkey D. Luffy. A lot of parents may be asking, who is that?**

**Luffy is the main character of One Piece. It's an anime and a manga. Luffy is a skinny young guy with big eyes. He always wears a straw hat over his messy black hair.**

**And One Piece has a lot of adult fans too. Shannon Strucci co-hosts a podcast about One Piece.**

*SHANNON: For me personally, I'm in my 30s, and it is like by far the most important piece of media I've ever consumed. And I also could personally imagine my life without it.*

**So, what is One Piece about? Long story short: pirates. Luffy is a good natured pirate. His crew are called The Straw Hats, even though he's the only one that wears a straw hat. And Luffy also has superpowers. He's basically made of rubber because he ate something called a devil fruit. Anyone who eats a devil fruit gets their own unique kind of powers.**

**And Luffy is obsessed with finding a treasure called the One Piece. Actually, all the pirates would like to find the One Piece. And if Luffy finds it first, he can be king of the pirates. But he's still a big kid at heart.**

**This is from the English language dub of the anime.**

*ZORO: Don't you find it dumb that someone trying to be king of the pirates doesn't have a single navigational skill?*

*LUFFY: Not really. I just drift around.*

**And Luffy doesn't care about getting rich either.**

*LUFFY: It's almost like you don't want me taking care of the gold.*

*NAMI: Yep. Only you could lose that much gold.*

*LUFFY: You guys don't trust me. Your own captain?*

*NAMI: Nope.*

*LUFFY: Aw, hey, that really hurts my feelings.*

**While the pirates are looking for the One Piece, all the pirates in this world are being hunted by the navy of an authoritarian world government. Shannon says that's one of the reasons why Luffy wants to become king of the pirates.**

SHANNON: The world government collects power through propaganda and genocide. And it lies to its people. And it puts, it's, you know, it divides people racially and divides people based on class to gain power. Luffy's ultimate goal to become King of the Pirates is like, it's more of a metaphor of attaining freedom for himself and the people that he cares about.

**And One Piece is not a niche fandom. The manga has sold over 500 million copies worldwide. That blows past the sales of any American comic book series ever. Adding in the merchandise and other types of media, One Piece is more than a billion dollar franchise. It's a \$20 billion dollar franchise.**

**And this summer, Netflix put out a big budget live action version of One Piece. And it debuted on Netflix at number 1 in 46 countries.**

*LUFFY: I'm Monkey D. Luffy.*

*ALVIDA: Never heard of you.*

*LUFFY: Well, remember the name because I'm going to be king of the pirates.*

*<laugh>.*

**There's another reason why One Piece has so many fans – its creator Eiichiro Oda.**

**Oda has drawn and written on every issue of the manga for more than a quarter century. He broke the Guinness Book of World Records for the most copies published by a single author of the same comic book series. And his drawing style is unique. He blends Japanese, European, and American comic book styles**

**into something edgy and eye-popping. The character designs are gigantically huge or adorably tiny or impossibly skinny.**

**The animated series and the live action show have been pretty faithful to the manga. And I think that's why the fans aren't divided like a lot of other franchises. There is a single creative mind at the center of everything.**

**Jordan Silva is a YouTuber who produces a lot of content about One Piece.**

JORDAN: The fandom likes to call him Goda because they call him the GOAT, which is why so many fans are like, oh my God, hopefully he ends this soon because like, he's not getting any younger <laugh>, you know, and a lot of manga artists, I don't want to say have the tendency, but a lot of them have a lot of health issues because they overwork themselves with crazy hours. They're constantly sitting down, arched over writing all the time. They don't really take care of themselves properly.

**Oda's work schedule is grueling. He sleeps 3 hours a day. He skips meals. The few times he's taken a break, it was international news.**

JORDAN: And then there's also really sad stuff like I've seen comments on YouTube or Twitter where there's people that say they're on their deathbed and one of the things is they, they wish they would know how the story ends. It's kind of crazy when you think about it because there's probably people that started reading or watching it in their 20s or 30s, uh, when it first came out, and now they're maybe in their 50s or almost 60s. And obviously you get the health complications and everything. And I think a lot of people just want to be able to see it finished.

**To get fully caught up, you have to read over 20,000 pages of the manga and watch over 350 hours of anime. A lot of people have. I could not. I sampled the manga and the anime. I watched the animated movies, which are good summaries of the major story arcs. And I watched the live action show, which I really liked.**

**But what got me hooked were the characters' backstories. That may seem like a trivial thing, but they are crucial to One Piece.**

**In fact, I get to the climactic moment in a storyline when we'd learn a character's backstory, it was like when you're watching a musical and you're waiting for the big song and dance number, or when you're watching a martial arts film and you're waiting for the big fight sequence. The backstory is the show stopping moment that's going to elevate everything to a new level.**

**I wanted to know, what is Oda doing exactly? How has he taken this very common storytelling device, and turned it into a powerful engine that is propelling an entire epic?**

AD BREAK

**Heads up, this episode contains a lot of spoilers. But it would take you months of dedicated watching and reading to get fully caught up.**

**Now, I was hesitant to get into One Piece at first -- and not just because of the time commitment. The world is very cartoony. There are silly creatures like a sea cow, which looks like a hybrid of a cow and a whale. And there are tons of gags, like when the crew realizes that Luffy has stuffed an octopus down his pants.**

*NAMI: Do you mind telling us why that thing's in your pants?*

*LUFFY: He helped us up when we fell from the sky, so I wanted to keep him safe.*

*SANJI: Wasn't that gross?*

*ZORO: For him or the octopus?*

*LUFFY: Gross how?*

**So at first glance, I didn't think One Piece had much depth to it. I was very wrong about that. One Piece can go from zany moments to tragic moments in a matter of minutes. The tonal shifts are wild. But Shannon doesn't feel whiplash because everything is so melodramatic, the happy moments and the sad moments. And she thinks that reflects Oda's towards the world he's creating.**

SHANNON: I think it's his optimism. And the work too, it's sort of a meta thing, like One Piece is super sincere, which especially now I feel like is harder to find in Western works.

**She compared it to the style of Joss Whedon of Buffy and Marvel fame.**

SHANNON: There's a lot of Joss Whedon-y sort of like self-effacing sarcasm in a lot of media that I don't really like personally. It's like the work is embarrassed of itself if it gets too silly. Because if the thing I'm watching doesn't believe in itself, why am I watching it?

**For example, one of my characters is Tony Tony Chopper. He's a member of Luffy's crew, The Straw Hats. Chopper is a very cute little reindeer man. He has a**

huge head and a tiny body. His antlers poke out of his oversized hats which are often pink or blue or both. And when he gets excited, his little arms wave up and down.

*ROBIN: Oh wow. Chopper, between your medical skills and talking to animals, you've got some amazing talents.*

*CHOPPER! Don't be silly, you jerk! You can't flatter me like that. Is it going to make me happy or anything?*

*CREW: He sure looks happy.*

**But his backstory is so sad! Chopper started out as a normal reindeer; except he had a blue nose, so he was an outcast like Rudolph. Then he ate one of those devil fruits which gives you powers. The devil fruit turned him into a little talking reindeer man. But when he needs to fight, he can enlarge himself into an enormously tall and muscular reindeer man.**

**So, he was an outcast among humans and animals. But a human doctor felt compassion towards him, and took him on as an apprentice. The doctor was actually not a very good doctor, but he meant well.**

**When the doctor got sick, Chopper tried to cure him but the batch of medicine that Chopper made accidentally poisoned his father-figure. Before the doctor could die of Chopper's poison, he blew himself up.**

*DOCTOR: I've had a marvelous life! Thank you, Chopper!*

*(EXPLOSION)*

**So when Luffy found Chopper and asked him to join their crew, Chopper was afraid.**

*CHOPPER: Maybe I do want to be a pirate, but I can never be one of you. I'm not human! I'm a monster! I can't be your friend, and I can't become a pirate on your ship! You see!*

**Daniel Dockery is a writer for the site Crunchyroll.**

DANIEL: I think that's the backstory that sticks me most because if you can create a, if you can create a, a flashback story that gets you to sob over a little reindeer man and a doctor who's not good at his job, but believes so much in the efficacy of what that job means, there's so many times that Oda takes these, like takes these characters even if

they're not very cute and just wrenches your heart with them. It's also, you know, a masterful storyteller at work to be like, oh, Oda got me again. There I am.

**The tonal shifts are very abrupt but it doesn't feel like a soap opera. The drawing style is so expressive, it feels natural that these characters would have dramatic backstories and feel their emotions strongly.**

DANIEL: A lot of times the backstories are about people who spoke from the heart and were persecuted for it.

SHANNON: He's very good at tugging at your heartstrings in a way that doesn't feel cliched or saccharine.

**Again, here's Shannon.**

SHANNON: Everything in the backstory not only ties into why does this character behave this way? Even if we didn't previously understand it, it makes total sense. And they also tie into the ideology of what he is trying to say. Like there's a lot of anti-fascist stuff, a lot of anti-racist, anti-colonial stuff that I think is really valuable. And it was valuable for me to read it when I was little too. I think it did, as far as a piece of media, like a comic I read could change my worldview, it definitely did.

**Luffy's crew, the Straw Hats, are good pirates, even if some didn't start out that way. But there are bad pirates. They're mean and greedy. Many stories culminate with Luffy having to fight these bad guys, who often have their own superpowers. But many of the villains have surprisingly sympathetic backstories.**

**I think the most extreme example is Señor Pink. He is like a gangster-pirate who dresses like a baby. He wears sunglasses, a half shirt, shorts that look like a diaper, and a giant baby bonnet. And he holds a pacifier in his teeth like it's a cigar.**

**Señor Pink seems like a one joke villain. Then we learned in a flashback that he was once a regular criminal trying to be a family man. One day his wife told him that their baby son had died.**

*RUSSIAN: He came down with a sudden fever. I rushed him to the hospital, but he didn't make it. You lied. You lied. I called the bank over and over, but they told me you were never employed there. Tell me the truth. What do you really do for a living? Where did the money come from? Say it!*

**When she found out the truth, she ran away from him but she got caught in a landslide. She ended up in a vegetative state. Senor Pink dressed as their infant son to try and get her to smile.**

*SENOR PINK: Don't I look like him? You used to say he had my face <laugh>. I'll do anything. Just show me that smile.*

**She does smile but stays in her vegetative state. So he keeps dressing like a baby.**

**Jordan has noticed consistent themes in the backstories which Oda writes.**

JORDAN: Discrimination, abuse, abandonment. Like, uh, he, he definitely touches on that a lot, like parent abandonment or, uh, you know, trust issues as well. I almost want to wonder if he went through some traumatic thing where he was abandoned by his parents when he was younger or something, because that's what he does for almost every character.

**And the characters are carrying around a lot of survivor's guilt.**

STEVE: One of the most, you know, reoccurring things in these flashbacks is the parental figure that sacrificed themselves or their passing, put the, these characters on their journey.

**That is Steve Yurko. He's a storyboard artist on Rick and Morty, and he does artwork for Shannon Strucci's One Piece podcast.**

STEVE: One of the great things about these flashbacks is the brief time you spent with it, you're introduced to these characters you probably have not seen in the present timeline because they die in these flashbacks -- giving just such like a great reason to why these characters are missed, almost like it's one of your own loved ones.

**One of Steve's favorite characters is Sanji, who is the cook on Luffy's crew. Sanji is suave and stylish, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. But whenever he sees beautiful women, Sanji loses his cool and swoons over them.**

*SANJI: You are beauty itself. It is my deepest dream come true. Yes, beauty has come searching for me!*

**Sanji actually has two tragic backstories. In the first one, we learn that when he was a kid, he was stranded on a desert island with a chef, who later became his mentor. The chef ate his own leg so young Sanji could survive!**

*SANJI: You old fool! Why did you help me?! It doesn't make sense to sacrifice so much for me!*

**By One Piece standards, that would have been enough. But later on, Oda added a second backstory. We learn that when Sanji was even younger, his father used to torment him.**

*SANJI: I used to hold onto all the resentment from so many years ago.*

*SFX: Banging sounds.*

*YOUNG SANJI: What did I do wrong, Dad? Let me out. I'm sorry! I'm sorry I was born so weak!*

STEVE: He was kind of the black sheep of his family, family and just outcasted for just being kind and generous and not cold and emotionless like his, his siblings were engineered to be, and I wouldn't say I was the black sheep in my family and all that, but you know, I kind of always grew up to be, you know, just a personable and easygoing and nice person. And, you know, that's not always looked upon as positive traits of a, of a boy or a man. There's a lot of toxic masculinity in Sanji's backstory and I sympathize with this because Sanji, you know, didn't really want to be like a brute, you know, or a fighter. He just, you know, he had a passion, and his passion was cooking, and he really liked doing that. And that was seen as like a weakness and, you know, and that, that hit kind of hard because I, you know, I always just liked art, that's the thing I always wanted to pursue in life. And I really didn't care about knocking anyone else down a peg or competing with others.

**In talking with fans, I noticed a lot of them were drawn to specific backstories because they resonated with them personally, even if the backstories were fantastical.**

**One of Jordan's favorites is Nico Robin. She starts out as an antagonist of the Straw Hat crew. Eventually she joins them, but not everyone on the crew was willing to accept her at first.**

*NAMI: You may have fooled these idiots, but I'm not convinced You pull anything, and I'll personally kick you out.*

*ROBIN: Alright. I'll keep that in mind.*



**Robin isn't quick to trust people either.**

JORDAN: I guess I could relate to her a little bit because she never really, she knew who her mom was, but she never really had time to spend with her mom because her mom was like, just constantly on the seas. She was an archeologist who was like one of the most famous archeologists uncovering the secrets of the world. And the government didn't like that, of course.

**So the world government wiped out the island that Robin came from. She survived. Her mother did not. Robin had to become a fugitive.**

**But she was an outcast even before that. When she was a kid, she ate one of the devil fruits. That gave her the power to project her limbs onto any surface. It became very useful in combat, but when she was young, people on her island were scared of her.**

JORDAN: It really like broke me because she got to a point where she was struggling to stay alive and, and, uh, she was by herself all alone. She had a bounty on her head, so she couldn't really ever trust anybody.

**Including the Straw Hat crew.**

*ROBIN: I've dragged you into my troubles twice already. If it goes on and on like this, no matter how kind you may be, someday you'll see me as a burden. Someday you'll be forced to betray me and throw me away. That's what I'm most afraid of. Understand. That's why I didn't want you to rescue me. If that's the only future I have, I'd rather die to save me the pain.*

JORDAN: Seeing that she finally had people that actually cared about her that she could actually trust, that really just wanted to be her friend and not use her. Uh, she like broke down and screamed. I want to live. And, uh, that was probably one of the most powerful moments in the entire anime that like really hooked me on the show.

**Shannon also identified with Robin, for different reasons.**

SHANNON: Especially as someone I'm a little bit more emotionally reserved and I've dealt with a lot of, uh, like in my own life when I was a kid, some really traumatic stuff. And I felt like maybe I've been misunderstood or like being a queer person in a conservative area and being told that not by my like family or anything, but like generally

being told that that's evil or that's wrong. And the fact that, you know, she's told again and again, like just existing is not a crime. Like you're okay just, just by being yourself or existing. You haven't hurt anybody. It's not your fault regardless of what the wider culture thinks of you or how many people are against you.

**So all these characters are burdened by their past. The big question is how do they move forward?**

AD BREAK

**Daniel has noticed another pattern with the One Piece backstories. The heroes and villains often come from equally tragic circumstances. But the members of the Straw Hat crew develop a different attitude towards what happened to them in their lives.**

DANIEL: They choose to take this thing and use it to kind of instill a greater strength in them. And that's what kind of separates them, is a villain will, a villain will experience this big tragic moment. And they'll use it as a think of pride, as a reason to, you know, a reason to release their worst urges.

**Again, Jordan Silva.**

JORDAN: I would say a lot of the reason why some of those people just turn out really bad is just because they don't have anyone in else in their corner and, and they don't have anyone to help them get out of that, you know, depth of despair before it's like the point of no return, you know? And I think it's the self-acceptance. If they just accept that what they happened to them was, you know, a random coincidence or if they just think that this, it's not fair that I went through this, that, that it's also something that can probably add to whether they become a villain or a quote unquote hero. But not every villain in the show has someone like Luffy to break them, you know, to get them out of that dark place. So I think Luffy is still like the big deciding factor in whether they become good or evil to be honest.

**But Monkey D. Luffy is a very unlikely character to inspire anyone's personal growth. Most of the time, Luffy is silly. He's childlike. He's a goofball. He can stretch himself like a rubber band. But he will become deadly serious if anyone threatens his crew. Again, here's Steve:**

STEVE: I would say there, there's a bit of purity to Luffy. It's pure that like, I don't think he could be corrupted. I don't think he, he's not afraid. He's not afraid to, uh, fail. He has

this kind of positivity that, you know, that he sees in his crew mates and potential crew mates, that he truly believes in them.

**In fact the story of One Piece isn't about Luffy having a big, transformative character arc. I mean, he does become a lot more powerful, but he's really more of a catalyst for change for other people.**

**The members of his crew have their own goals. But at some point along the way, many of them gave up or they questioned themselves. Jordan says Luffy has helped them see that their goals are worthy, and that they're worthy.**

JORDAN: He doesn't see them as an object or a tool, which is what most of them were used as their entire life. And the fact that knowing that he does all that without wanting anything in return at all, uh, I think is what just really made them resonate with him so much and have loyalty towards him and want him to, uh, want to help him achieve his goal of, uh, becoming king of the pirates.

*SANJI: I'm going to The Grand Line to find the All Blue.*

*LUFFY: I'm going to be king of the pirates!*

*ZORO: The world's best swordsman.*

*NAMI: I'm going so I can draw a map of the entire world.*

*USOPP: I guess I'm going to be a brave warrior on the sea.*

**The last voice you heard was the character Usopp. Usopp is an excellent marksman with a slingshot. When the crew is fighting a battle, he rises to the occasion over and over again.**

**But Usopp is often afraid. He's insecure. He makes up all these stories about incredible things he never did. Daniel actually loves that aspect of the character.**

DANIEL: He wants to have that kind of bravery. He wants to have that bravery kind of bravery inherently, and he never quite does. And I think that's the point of the story is that Usopp story, as a person, as a normal person, you will never quite have the sense of innate storybook bravery that you see these people have, that you see Luffy have, that Luffy has in like to supernatural quantities. But that doesn't mean that you stop trying to be brave.

**His favorite storyline with Usopp had to do with their ship. The crew acquired their first ship in the storyline when they met Usopp.**

DANIEL: Usopp kind of takes care of the ship and it's getting beaten up and beaten up and beaten up. And Usopp <laugh> as the story goes, gets beaten up and beaten up and beaten up. And he wins kind of by luck and by chance, and by scheming. And Usopp grows to kind of heavily relate himself to the ship. And so, when they decide we need to get a new ship, this ship is falling apart, Usopp takes it kind of upon himself as the ship means me. If they're this willing to get rid of the ship that's taken them to so many places, they could easily get rid of me.

*USOPP: Don't worry. I'll fix you up right away, every time, as many times as you need, no matter what. I'll always take care of you. Always!*

DANIEL: Usopp, for the rest of the series where he is very much like, he's very much grappling with his own insecurity about his place among this, all of these powerhouse people of the sea. And his constant thing is, no, I have to be brave. I have to be brave. It sounds really simple, but this kind of unwavering sense of not giving up, this kind of resolute, why give up? I used to give up on stuff a lot all the time. If I wasn't immediately good at it, no, I didn't want to do it anymore. And One Piece has kind of taught me to, to put more time into stuff that I'm not immediately good at from the beginning kind of like Usopp, because he is not immediately good at being a brave warrior of the sea, but he can try and if he tries enough, he prevails. And that's kind of what One Piece has taught me is that liking and going for stuff is always kind of inevitably going to be hazardous, but if you just try it and just take the chance on trying it, you know, you don't know if it's going to fail or succeed, but the succeed part, there's always a chance for that.

**These themes of self-acceptance and found family are what makes a lot of fans feel like they're part of the crew.**

DANIEL: There's a lot of people who like the Straw Hat crew members a lot because they relate to their very distinct either aspiration or very distinct brand of loneliness. And I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean that in a way that everybody, everybody in the world at times kind of feels like they're by themselves no matter who you are, you felt like you're the only person who believes something or you're just the only person who connects with you. And One Piece is about the fact that what if you're wrong? What if no matter what character you identify with or you know what plot point you identify with, that there is something out there for you that's very good. And it's other people. And I think also it's why people take One Piece to their real lives so often because you might be the Luffy for somebody else, someone else might be the Luffy for you.

**And Shannon says if there isn't a Luffy in your life, you can get the X tattoo of the Straw Hats.**

SHANNON: And a ton of people including people I know get the X tattoo on their left arm. Like if you're at an anime convention and you see people with an X on their arm, it's a hundred percent. And like there probably are hundreds if not thousands of people who got that specific tattoo that are about like, you belong with us, and we belong with you. That's the feeling that it evokes in people.

**Oda has indicated that he's reaching the end of One Piece. There's a lot of discussion around how the story could end, and what mysteries are left to be resolved. But there's one lesson that the fans have already learned -- how to see the difficult events of your past as being part of your backstory and not your entire story.**

**That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Steve Yurko, Shannon Strucci, Daniel Dockery and Jordan Silva.**

**There were so many One Piece characters with great backstories I didn't have time to cover. Let me know which ones really spoke to you.**

**If you liked this episode, you should check out my previous episodes about Cowboy Bebop, Sailor Moon, Ghost in the Shell, Neon Genesis Evangelion, and the films of Miyazaki.**

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