

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

**I recently got an email from a listener – her name is Elizabeth Simoneau – and she was asking if I'd ever consider doing an episode on how we grieve the loss of fictional characters. This came out of a Facebook post that she had done, and she was surprised how many of her friends had really passionate opinions about the characters that they were grieving over.**

**By coincidence, I had been thinking about this idea for a few months as I was trying to make sense of the ending of Infinity War.**

**By the way, spoiler alert, I'm about to talk about the ending of Avengers: Infinity War.**

**If you haven't seen the movie but don't care about spoilers, the villain, Thanos, is trying to acquire these infinity stones which will give him god-like powers. And his goal is erase half the living beings in the universe because they're a drain on the total supply of natural resources – like a very cold and calculating environmentalist. Shockingly, the heroes fail to stop him. Thanos gets all five stones, snaps his fingers -- and half the characters crumble into dust.**

**I know a lot of people felt the ending was a cheap trick because even though we saw characters like Black Panther, Spider-Man and The Guardians of the Galaxy turn to dust – we know those actors are signed up for sequels that already have release dates. If anything we're in a holding pattern until part two when we learn how the surviving Avengers will bring everyone else back. And fans have been scrutinizing which actor's contracts are up after this next movie, trying to predict who will die this time, no backsies.**

**But that didn't matter to me when I watched Infinity War. I still found those deaths unnerving and powerful. And there is one scene I can't get out of my head -- I've thought about it at least once a day since saw the movie. It's the scene where Peter Parker dies in Tony Stark's arms. And for Tony, Peter is not just a mentee. He's like the son that Tony never had. And so I found his death heartbreaking.**

*PETER: I don't feel so good.*

*TONY: You're all right*

*PETER: I don't know what's happening. I don't want to go, Mr. Stark! I don't want to go! Please, I don't want to go!*

DANIEL: In the world of it -- it's desperately sad.

**That is Daniel Skorka, who is a regular listener to this podcast.**

DANIEL: Tony is torn up about this kid who he wants to be better than him. And you know and May is now back in New York you know perhaps maybe she's disappeared as well but she might be now looking for her. Peter and he's now coming home.

**Daniel was one of many listeners I got in touch with for this episode after I put a call out to social media to see if anyone else has had difficulty getting over the loss of a fictional character. In fact, hundreds of listeners responded, and as I was reading through the tread, it got to the point where people were consoling each other over characters that I'm embarrassed to admit I had even never heard of from books I never read.**

**But there were certain characters that kept cropping up over and over again. So I called up a bunch of the people to hear about the feelings they had over losing someone who never existed.**

**> BREAK**

**Someone joked I should just call this episode thirty years of spoilers because if I ever mention a show, book or movie, I'm going to spoil the ending. Although many of these deaths are very well known in pop culture lore.**

**Although one of the most common experiences people had was with a game I had never played: Final Fantasy VII. So I watched some of the gameplay online, and it has this blocky 1990s computer graphics look -- with text appearing on screen instead of spoken dialogue -- but it still captures the feeling of hand drawn anime cartoons. And it's still surprisingly beautiful to watch.**

**When Tim Burke learned about the game, it was still pretty new.**

TIM: It was sixth grade. A friend of mine who I sat next to in school had the game.

**And he lent Tim the strategy guide – which really intrigued him. So Tim started playing, and he became attached to a character called Aeries.**

TIM: I mean they build her up as this very loving caring person who growing up her mother was taken from her so she was pretty much adopted by a lady who found her and her mother at a train station, as her mother was dying, and when you first meet her you bump into her on the street. She is handing out flowers to people that she picks from a church. I could see maybe my grandmother in her because my grandfather was a very loving individual.

**Aeries joins the main character on his quest. She's not a fighter, so you don't expect her to die in combat. But she's killed at a horribly vulnerable moment. She's kneeling in prayer when the villain leaps down and plunges his sword through her back.**

TIM: The weird thing was I knew this moment was coming. I had seen it in a strategy guide my friend who had beaten the game had told me about it and all. So I was well prepared for it but this moment comes and you're just sitting there and you're like completely I guess in shock that this happens and you can't do anything. And it is to me at 11 years old was probably one of the most emotional things that I had I had witnessed.

***It's funny. I mean the character that will developed typically if they are to die it's always sort of the noble death you know like no you know the only way that we'll save all these people is if one of us stays in the ship or you know you go without me like I feel like those are sad but we're willing to accept them. But when she's just killed so horribly and cruelly like that and it sounds like that's part of what was just so hard to wrap your head around.***

TIM: Oh absolutely. I mean her death ultimately serves a major purpose because you find out she was praying to help save the planet from the meteor that was coming but at the moment you don't realize you don't realize there's any heroic nature to it. And I go every year or so every year every other year I go back and I play through the game again because it is my favorite game of all time and I still I mean when I get to that part it's never easy because again a fantastic character and she's just taken from you.

**Most people I talked with said they experienced their first fictional death around the same age, when they were on the verge of moving from childhood to adolescence.**

**That's when Dawn Fancher first saw *The Neverending Story*. That movie is a story within a story, about a boy in our world who is reading about a boy in a fantasy world. The boy in the real world is mourning the loss of his mother, and there are echoes of his emotional turmoil in the journey of the boy he's reading about in the fairy tale.**

**Like at one point, the boy in the fantasy story, who is called Atreyu is leading his horse Artax through "The Swamp of Sadness."**

DAWN: The deal with this swamp is that if you let the sadness overtake you then the swamp will swallow you up.

**The boy is able to control his emotions but his horse can't.**

DAWN: And Atreyu goes from like reassuring the horse that you know we're going to make you know this is like come on we're doing this to like being more and more desperate to get his horse to come out and is like you have to move will you die.

*ATREYU: Artax! Fight against the sadness, Artax!*

He's just screaming and wailing and he is full of sadness and the horse just starts sinking further and further down and so like the movie shows a real horse like sinking in muddy water. They don't show the horse go all the way under. But you know you see it up to like the horses like the horses like training it's neck and then it cuts to till Atreyu sitting there staring at the spot in the swamp where the horse went down. And it seems like an unfair death because the swamp makes you sad but then the sadness overtakes or you die and it seems like it's it seems like a bit of a trap and it seems very unfair.

**Although she had mixed feelings when the horse magically came back to life at the end.**

DAWN: I felt it felt like it maybe was a little cheap that it came back you know it was really happy that they did like it because everyone comes back too. But it was it felt really good to see the horse again.

**But the movie still left a huge impression on her:**

DAWN: It was one of the first movies that I remember seeing treating death that seriously. (BEAT) I had a sister a lot of disability who we didn't know how long she would live. And so the idea that she could die early and she did die in her late 20s. But she did make it through childhood, and that was always with me.

**Now as a parent, Dawn has been helping her daughter deal with loss in fiction.**

DAWN: I take that hurt seriously, so I just try to support her through it and just let her be sad. It's important for kids to know because I felt like my some of my big feelings and my grief when I was a kid wasn't taken seriously it was always very very careful to make sure I was always taking her grief and feeling seriously.

**But parents are not immune from grief when they watch movies with their kids, like when Dawn and her daughter watched Inside Out, which takes place in the subconscious mind of an 11-year old girl. At one point, the girl's imaginary friend from early childhood, Bing Bong, has a type of death when he literally fades from memory.**

*BING BONG: Take her to the moon for me, okay?*

*JOY: I'll try Bing Bong. I promise*

DAWN: I was watching that as a kid who was getting older, I was crying the entire movie. Like just tears down my face the entire movie. And so she thought it was sad but like it was definitely because of her age she was definitely hitting me a lot more. But then she was very nice and she made sure to like reminisce with me about her about Big Al the Allosaurus her imaginary friend when she was a kid the next day or for a couple of days we told the old big owl stories and that that was so that was really sweet.

**As I mentioned there were certain universal experiences when it came to mourning characters. The Walking Dead is storytelling machine that makes you attached to characters before killing them off over and over again. Game of Thrones almost works the same way. And then there's Harry Potter, which a lot of kids didn't expect to have a high death toll, so those last two books really shook them.**

**When Maria Clara Santarosa was a kid, she cried inconsolably after she read the death of Dumbledore in The Half Blood Prince. Looking back, she thinks it may be because Dumbledore also reminded her of her father.**

MARIA: My dad is a little older so I mean he had grey hair and people ask me all the time if it was my grandfather and I always thought of as my dad it's this you know really wise men and whatever so I guess I did associate was a little bit like oh my God maybe I mean my dad is going to die some day.

**Her mother tried to comfort her, but nothing helped until she read the next book, The Deathly Hollows, where Harry meets Dumbledore in a kind of purgatory vision.**

MARIA: It felt really satisfying to see Dumbledore again there much like when a real person dies and you're grieving and then I mean you go to sleep and you dream with them and it's very comforting to see them again in that dream I think to me that passage was sort of the same thing. It was like oh get to see them with there once again and he's like:

*DUMBLEDORE: Don't pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living and above all, those without love.*

MARIA: And I think in some way JK Rowling with that scene made me feel better. ***You know that's so interesting that like your mom as much as you tried she wasn't able to comfort you the way that J.K. Rowling was able to comfort you through that scene in the seventh book.***

MARIA: Yeah I think that's right. I needed it from come from Harry Potter. So I could really because when my mom told me everything was going to be OK I was like OK sure. But you don't understand it. You don't you know you don't get it you don't know how I'm feeling. So I guess when it came from the books and from Dumbledore himself, it was you know from the story, inside the story.

**But even adults have struggled with Harry Potter deaths.**

MEGAN: I've had people react to me when I've had – when I've been very upset about Sirius Black or Fred Weasley or Dumbledore and I get these looks like really? If your pet died I'd understand that more and I'm not a pet person but if you really care about these characters they are real for you.

**The character Megan Knox identified with the most was Fred Weasley. Fred had a twin brother George, and in real life, Megan has a twin sister Meredith. And Megan always liked the way Rowling depicted the Weasley twins, their rapport felt very authentic to her. And so when she got to the last books, where Fred Weasley is killed:**

MEGAN: It's one of the few times in my life where I actually dropped a book on the floor. I was like I can't read this anymore right now. And when my sister and I talked about it we were both had the same feeling of that it was especially cruel because we figured we're not going to make it through with all the Weasleys but you're going to break up the set and that we felt the same way about it that it was you take both of them or you save both of them. You don't take one. It's not like there's a spare. We're not the same people.

**And what really bothers Megan is that she thinks JK Rowling's decision to kill off George was done capriciously.**

MEGAN: When she decided not to kill Mr. Weasley at I think that was the end of book five. She said well there was no way all of the Weasleys were making it so. It felt like an even more of a choice of well, I just felt like I couldn't kill this character so I'm taking got one instead.

**Megan was also upset about the deaths we didn't witness; the characters that were just mentioned as part of the body count in the final battle.**

MEGAN: When you're reading it you're at least you're there with it you're with the characters or witnessing it and experiencing it and you're getting to experience it with them and when it happens off page it almost feels like you're a little bit robbed of the experience of going through this because that's so much how death happens in real life you're told about it afterwards. But in books you can be there with it.

***Yeah I mean death as exposition is kind of a cruel way to experience the loss of a character.***

MEGAN: Yeah and real life is death is usually exposition it's usually somebody calls you and tells you or you find out because of a newspaper article or a Facebook status update. You're not there with somebody usually when they passed

**Of the five stages of grief, the last stage is supposed to be acceptance. But it's hard to go through the five stages when you know it wasn't fate or an**

**act of God that killed off your favorite character. It was a very human writer. And if the fans feel the explanations from the writer isn't satisfying:**

STEPHANIE: You get stuck in that anger phase, and I'm still very angry at him to this day.

**The "him" that my assistant producer Stephanie Billman is referring to is Joss Whedon.**

**Stephanie was a huge fan of the series Firefly, which was cancelled by Fox after one season. But Whedon managed to raised the funds to create a movie version of Firefly, which was called Serenity.**

**And like a lot of Firefly fans, Stephanie was really excited to see the movie Serenity. And she particularly loved the characters of Wash and Zoe, who were a married couple.**

*WASH: Here lies my beloved Zoe, my autumn flower*

*ZOE: (Laughs)*

*WASH: Somewhere less attractive now that she's all corpseified and gross*

*ZOE☺ Laughs)*

**So she was shocked when towards of the end of the movie, the character of Wash was suddenly impaled to death by this zombie-like creature.**

*SFX: CRASH*

*Wash! Baby! Baby, no!*

STEPHANIE: I was so numb and it hurt me so much. It might as well have been someone I know personally having died.

**Like Megan Knox, she thinks that her favorite character was killed as just a narrative device to heighten the stakes, but so much more was lost in the process. In fact, she feels like Wash's death in the movie almost ruined the TV show that came before it.**

STEPHANIE: Especially any scenes where him and Zoe are talking about their future together. Yeah. So I think about as like that's not happening. And then I start to get really sad and then I'm like well can't watch this anymore. There are certain episodes that I can't watch. It really breaks my heart because you get see



the softness that he brought out in her and you get to see the strength that he she gave him. And for me to especially at the time I was engaged to a white guy. And so they're an interracial couple on the screen and you see that on for me I was like oh that's like my relationship and Wash kind of reminds me of my ideal guy like that personality of my ideal guy that goofy but sweet and caring person. And watching him die like this just hurts. This is this hurts and this hurts for no reason. And that's I think it's hurts and it hurts for no reason. It did not have to happen.

**The way that she deals with her mourning is to keep watching the actor Alan Tudyk in any other role.**

STEPHANIE: Because I get to still see his face. And it's always to me going to be a wash. But I see him in these different situations so I'm better now. I'm like oh I'll go. You know he was and you know he was the voice of the robot in Rogue One. *I was going to say, did you feel him in there too?*

STEPHANIE: Yeah no totally. Yeah. Any anytime he's at Comic Con I go watch his panel and I will sit in a standing in a standing room only panel just to be able to see him just because I'm like oh because he's got there's elements of wash in him like there's a clear it's clear that he put a lot of washes like person out like his sense of humor and sarcasm there's it's Alan Tudyk. So when I see him in other things it makes me feel like OK Wash has just been reincarnated and now he's a robot in Rogue One you know or now he's doing something else.

**When Leigh Foster was a teenager, she was also drawn into a world created by Joss Whedon – Buffy the Vampire Slayer. And Leigh was particular fascinated by two characters on that show: Willow and Tara. Willow and Tara were witches, and one of the few lesbian couples on TV back then.**

LEIGH: I remember when Willow came out because well it came out before I did. And a lot of actually I think a lot of Willow and Tara together happened before I sort of consciously came out.

**In fact watching Willow come out and fall in love with Tara helped Leigh come to terms with her own sexuality. So she was shocked when in the sixth season, Tara was accidently hit by a bullet meant for Buffy. And Tara's death sends Willow down a dark path to the point where she becomes the supernatural villain that Buffy has to fight.**

LEIGH: I do think it's necessary, I really like Willow's arc after that. I think it's important for where she gets in the series. But that moment of just you know they've come so far they've had the whole betrayal and then they're happy they're together they're in bed you're just you feel so good and then and with the back to the window and no you know no reason to think anything's going to happen.

*SFX: GUN SHOTS*

*TARA: Your shit.*

*SFX: Tara falls*

*WILLOW: Tara? Tara, baby, no!*

LEIGH: That scene when you watch it, it just feels so important to have her die and die like that. The aftermath is eventful. Willow's response is eventful but the death itself is almost nothing. Oh look a bullet and a couple blood splatters on her face and then – and then you're just gone.

**When a writer or a group of writers kill off a character -- and that decision feels unjustified – that death can actually destroy our suspension of disbelief to the point where we're not only mourning the loss of that character but the loss of that fictional world that we used to love but we no longer believe in.**

**This kind of phenomenon has been of interest to psychologists and academics lately. In fact there's a term for when people feel deep emotional connections to fictional characters. They're called parasocial relationships.**

**For most of human evolution, if you saw someone on the regular basis, and you knew intimate details about them -- then you knew them. Fictional characters and celebrities that we know through the media are a relatively recent phenomenon. So there is a primordial part of our brains that can't distinguish between Harry Potter being a fictional boy, and a real boy we went to school with.**

**Jennifer Barnes is a professor at the University of Oklahoma, who studies parasocial relationships, and she says they're actually pretty healthy.**

JENNIFER: The research says that the benefits of parasocial relationships work like real relationships. There is research that suggests in the presence of a favorite fictional characters, so if you're thinking about them, or looking at their

picture, doing things like that can help your self esteem if you're feeling isolated there's research that suggests you might actually perform better on some tasks just as you would in the presence of a real friend.

**And her research has shown one consistent factor in many of these characters that we feel a strongest kinship with.**

JENNIFER: We have some data a lot of favorite fictional characters have what's called an avoidant attachment style, so meaning that they themselves find it hard to form close relationships, but I think the thing that might be attractive about characters who have relationship with one character and have difficulty relating to people outside that when we form a parasocial relationship with them maybe we feel very high in their hierarchy of who matters to them. So the example in our data set was the BBC show Sherlock. Right? So Sherlock has a close relationship with John Watson on the show, but as a viewer you may on some subconscious level be thinking, Sherlock's best friends are Watson and me.

**That may be why Spock is a character a lot of Star Trek fans feel a strong affinity towards because Spock has one true friend: James Kirk.**

**Growing up in Ireland, Daniel Skorka had always been vaguely aware of Spock as a pop culture icon. So when he was in college, he decided to dedicate himself to watching the whole series and the movies. And he immediately felt a strong kinship with Spock.**

DANIEL: I feel kind of detached from a lot of people love social things and I've just felt like it's my entire life. And Spock seemed like a friend in that regard.

**When Daniel got to The Wrath of Khan, he knew that Spock's death was coming, and that it wouldn't take. I mean the next movie is called The Search for Spock. But he was surprised by how devastated he felt – especially the way Spock sacrificed himself to save the rest of the crew.**

DANIEL: Though he made it look like it was a logical choice was obviously based on emotions you know an engineer could have easily walked into that place and on the job and they could have died. You know Scotty all most tries to stop and say hey look you'll die and he Vulcan pinches Scotty on the floor. He's helping all of us friends by making the ultimate sacrifice and it's it I think it's because I like being logical. That's a leap beyond logic that's a leap towards you know wanting to protect and save your family and friends.

**What really got to Daniel was the way that scene explored the bond between Spock and Kirk, a friendship where so much is usually left unsaid.**

*SPOCK: I have and will always be your friend*

DANIEL: And it's almost like he indulged himself a little bit and you know that last moment, trying to hide oh no this is for the greater good, the needs of many outweigh the needs of few, but him cracking in those last few moments turn Kirk how you know you're my friend. You know I'll always be your friends, which you know in the logical spectrum of things not really that important, but obviously there's a bit of humanity that Spock had that still kind of shone through. And even now of makes me a bit emotional. You might hear my voice.

*KIRK: Of all the souls I have met (chokes up) his was the most human.*

*SFX: BAG PIPES*

**Not every character gets a proper funeral, but Spock did – possibly because they weren't sure if Leonard Nimoy was coming back. And Daniel always found comfort in that moment of mourning, especially with the use of Amazing Grace.**

DANIEL: Yeah, Amazing Grace is all about grace is all about faith it's about grace and faith and reach for something that goes beyond logic, and in that place not moment, I mean the very sort of artificial idea of Vulcan's falls away and in that last moment there is a sort of reflection on seeing the truth the moral truth of things rather than just the logical truth of things. Every time it gets me and hits my core.

**When a character that we loved dies – even if we think that character has been killed unjustly – I still think there is value to that feeling of grief and the healing process that comes afterward. Because the vicarious experiences we get from fiction are often valuable in the real world, either as preparation or reflection for what happens to us life. And learning to deal with loss is a skill that will always come in handy.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Elizabeth Simoneau, Daniel Skorka, Megan Knox, Dawn Fancher, Tim Burke, Maria Clara Santarosa, Leigh Foster, Jennifer Barns, and my assistant producer, Stephanie Billman.**

**By the way, Leigh Foster talked about Willow and Tara on her podcast, Lez Hang Out, where she and her co-host discussed a much larger problem of LGBT characters who getting killed off as martyrs or to further the development of a different character.**

LEIGH: I mean it does start to get to you to realize how many of the characters you identify with kind of end that way, end with these sort of oh I guess you've run your course. The end.

**You should definitely check out their episode on this subject, it's titled, "bury your gays." I'll include a link in the show notes.**

**And thanks to everyone else who shared your stories online. I know there are so many more imaginary deaths didn't get to. Feel free to share them on my Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagin worlds pod.**

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