

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

Until very recently, I didn't realize that military science fiction is a sub-genre on its own. Which is interesting because the military shows up in science fiction all the time -- although they're usually like fodder that the alien or monster wipes out before the super heroes swoops in to save the day.

And if the hero is in the military, there's no guarantee the military will be portrayed with any kind of accuracy. And how would we know if we haven't served?

That didn't used to be the case. But today I read stories about veterans who come back from Iraq or Afghanistan feeling like most of us can't understand what they've been through.

It's no coincidence the genre of military sci-fi took off in the early '70s when the all-volunteer army was established. Some authors had direct battlefield experience, and that was part of the genre's appeal that sense of verisimilitude.

And then there are writers like Linda Nagata. She lives in Hawaii and she just did a ton of research for her Red trilogy, which is very high tech near future military sci-fi.

LN: And some people express surprise that I got quote unquote military life that accurate, which is always nice to hear.

Because you didn't serve in the military?

LN: I did not serve in the military, that's right.

Did that ever give you any pause because there are definitely a lot of authors that did serve in the military that's mentioned in their bio?

LN: Um hum, yeah when I first started -- I was a little hesitant about it for that reason, but at the same time I ran it by my son-in-law who was army infantry for a number of years, so I had someone to vet it for me and let me know if I was doing any foot and mouth problems.

Linda says she drawn to this genre because of its universal themes of duty, honor, and the moral quandaries that soldiers face.

LN: As writers that what we're here to try and imagine what people might be doing under these circumstances.

Her books are critically acclaimed. They've been nominated and won awards, but she often has to self-publish. In fact her latest novel, *The Last Good Man*, was turned down by 14 publishers. She's not sure why but thinks they might be influenced by the very clichés about the military that this genre was supposed to avoid because those clichés are marketable.

LN: I mean my newest novel people will tell you its action from beginning to end, but that's not what traditional publishers say they want to start in the middle of a battle, but I do get the impression what they're looking for is somebody starts off in boot camp and they have adventures there and go on to a wider field of experience.

I read somewhere you wish sometimes you took a gender-neutral name, does that still bother you sometimes?

LN: Yeah, but it's kind of too late to change for me, I feel.

But do you feel even specifically military science fiction, see a woman's name and discount that you could write it the same way a man could?

LN: It's hard not to have that suspicion. And that said, I'll also say that easily the majority of my readers are men. But I did have one experience when the Red Trilogy came out and I got an email from a gentlemen who said he'd read it and it was the first book he'd read by a woman in 20 years.

Wow!

LN: (Laughs) So yeah, I think there might still a little bit of an issue out there – yeah.

Today I will be talking with authors that are wrestling with the issue of how to use fantasy and sci-fi to bridge that gap between what we think the military is and what it's really like to serve in the armed forces.

That's a lot more after the break.

BREAK

Taylor Anderson is a jack-of-all-trades. He's a military historian, with a focus on Texas history. He collects antique firearms and makes perfect replicas. He also served as a consultant on the 2004 film 'The Alamo.'

TA: Yeah. Any time a cannon fired I had to be there and it was pretty grueling in a lot of ways.

He had a lot of downtime on set, so one day; he was talking with the crew about other famous last stands in history.

TA: After several discussions after different examples I said what about the US Asiatic Fleet? And nobody knew what I was talking about.

The Asiatic Fleet was a division of the Navy that disappeared in the Pacific Ocean about a year after Pearl Harbor.

TA: I was kind of disappointed and stunned in fact, and I thought I always enjoyed writing but I never finished anything to be honest, I had too many other things I had to do.

And by writing, he means writing fiction. But he couldn't stop thinking about that lost fleet, and he wondered what if they didn't perish? What if they ended up in a parallel dimension? That's when he began writing his series, The Destroyermen.

As a military historian, the thing he finds so endearing about the Asiatic Fleet is that they were relics from World War I. Those ships should've decommissioned -- not sent into battle.

TA: They didn't have sound equipment for detecting submarines and they had virtually no anti air craft capability. When they were confronted with cream of Japanese navy which was most modern navy, they were at a distinct disadvantage and it was just a harrowing ordeal and several of those ships literally did disappear without a trace.

It's funny you saved them through fiction in a weird way.

TA: Well, I guess so. And I specifically deliberately didn't use any ships that actually saw service in WWII because they had real wartime records and I figured doing such a thing would disrespect that.

Although he didn't send them to a nice cushy parallel universe -- he sent them to a world where the dinosaurs were not wiped off by an asteroid, and life on Earth evolved very differently. And so the humans of the Asiatic Fleet sort of team up with the highly evolved primates of this dimension, a species called Lemurians, which like a combination of humans and lemurs.

TA: And this from the perspective from people in the 1940s who didn't know nearly as much about dinosaurs as we do today. You know even to this day in the series, they have come to the conclusion that yeah things are tough here and we have a lot to deal with but we were dead back there. Maybe we're here for a reason.

As fantastical as it sounds, he is meticulous about the technical details regarding the ship. He also strives to debunk the cliché that the military would be unable to improvise or adapt if they faced a fantastical enemy they didn't train for.

TA: Or the cliché that they're always seeking to engage in combat or to dominate. The war fighters are the people on the front lines, they're the ones that are most affected and they're generally going to be the least inclined to engage in combat if it can be avoided.

As you can tell, his reverence for the military runs deep. Many of his relatives were veterans. But he didn't make it past ROTC because of a football injury.

That's one of his biggest regrets in his life. And his imaginary career in the military is the other parallel universe he wonders about.

TA: You know I think about it because all my friends that went on to serve and some have now retired from the military. You know I think of the time I would've had with them or in the same service but at the same time I think of all the other experiences I've had and wouldn't have had that brought me to this point. And I certainly wouldn't have had my daughter.

And his daughter is in the army now.

TA: I'm so proud of her, I almost burst all the time.

Now I was curious about the feedback he gets because military sci-fi isn't usually this fantastical.

Turns out the first group of fans he attracted were Furrries – people that dress in animal costumes. They were attracted to his Lemurian characters,

the highly evolved primates in the alt-universe. And until they found him, Taylor had never heard of furies before.

TA: They would start arguing with each other on my website and having fights and things like that and finally I said look, I'm perfectly fine with y'all dressing up as critters but I'm not one of you! (Laughs) If I were a creature in the woods I would probably be a predatory creature that would eat most of you.

The feedback he got from people in the armed forces was more what he expected. Like anyone, they love seeing versions of themselves they recognize in fiction.

TA: I get so much feedback from the military you know guys that are reading my books that are deployed and one particular guy that we've become friends just emailed me out of the blue he'd been blown up and traumatic brain injury and was relearning to read in the hospital by reading my books.

Wow.

TA: Like I said, it's been very, very humbling.

But everyone's experience in the military is different, and those differences play out within the genre.

In fact, let's leave Texas and come back to New York – where Myke Cole lives.

He served three tours in Iraq and today he works for – well, he can't exactly say, its *kind of* a top-secret job.

MC: I work for large metro police department not tell you where move out of five boroughs of New York City, I lose my job, not give away, I have 1st amendment right to tell you where I work.

Myke grew up in the suburbs outside the city, which sounds pleasant but it was rough for him.

MC: I grew up a nerd and when you grow up a nerd, I couldn't get dates, got ass kicked and hard time making friends, and I was super isolated.

So he spent a lot of time at the gym.

MC: And then like your body is changing, so developed violent power overnight.

Violent power?

MC: Violent power like I had ability to project violently, my size changed, and when you're not raised I turned into a monster, I turned into a bully, I turned into a bad kid, I think back on who I was and I shudder and it wasn't until really around 9/11 that I figured out that professional violence was a thing I had aptitude for and there was a way to do it that was just and good and served other people that would connect me to helping other people.

Myke says he enlisted because he believed a lot of stories that weren't true – like Saddam Hussein was in league with Al Qaeda and he was responsible for 9/11. Once he got to Iraq, he realized the situation on the ground was nothing like what he expected.

MC: Maybe someone smarter than me pulled stakes and walked but I was part of the reason that war started, I stumped for it, I supported, I wanted it and by god if I broke it would be my ass down there seeing it through and it wasn't until my third time my dad, brother and best friend they all said Myke it's enough, and I still tried to go back again

A fourth time?

MC: Yeah and the fourth time I tried to get Afghanistan tour, where you could sign up for suicide missions to drive around valley until someone blows you up.

He was also feeling frustrated because he was working on his first novel, and it kept getting rejected by publishers.

MC: I wrote under fire, sitting at 4am writing on my laptop and having to collect my work and run for a bunker, I kept at it, and I developed unhealthy sense of entitlement, I risked my life, I'd been a good guy, surely I deserved a book deal, such an insane way to think and I turned into monster, I was so angry and bitter that was when I volunteered tour in Afghanistan and what stopped me is I got a book deal.

That series of books is called Shadow Ops. The initial spark of inspiration came years earlier when he was working at the Pentagon.

MC: I don't know what experience listeners dealing with military people think of firepower and force it's not what I think of, I think of rules, they have a rule for everything but I'm walking around the Pentagon like very good nerd, what if there were elves, what if there was maaaagic? I know what military would do, they'd

make rules. They'd cover in rules, every aspect of magic so rule bound that they would manage to make magic boring they would cover it in red tape.

That's why I like about the series -- it feels like such an American response to magic. Unlike Harry Potter, magic isn't left to elite academic institutions and the Prime Minister wants to be out of the loop. His world of magic is heavily regulated. In his book, people throw around acronyms like SOC, which stands for the Supernatural Operations Corps. He says it's all about projecting a sense of calm authority and control when dealing with wildly uncontrollable elements.

MC: And because life doesn't fuck about rules, inevitably some good person falls into cracks and get crushed.

That's his main character, Oscar Britton. He starts out as a model soldier who works alongside government-approved sorcerers to take down rogue sorcerers. But then Oscar discovers he has magic within him. He panics, runs and then learns the hard way how the military neutralizes and coopts magic users.

MC: I got a lot of hate mail.

Really?

MC: Saying this guy would've never made it, he doesn't seem real, no mother fucker this is exactly who he is, I don't know who you know in military but if you want Steven Segal, go watch Hard to Kill. That's not the character I'm going to write into a Shadow Ops novel, that's not story I wanted to tell.

I asked Myke if he thinks military sci-fi and fantasy could help bridge that gap between people that served and people who didn't. But Myke thinks the gap is only in our minds. He says the military is made up of civilians, so it's just as diverse as the population it's drawing from. And they're not living in a parallel dimension. They're dealing with all the same stuff as everyone else from mortgages to traffic jams.

MC: And what gets frustrating to me is I meet people who want to write military stories, who want to write about the military, and don't feel they have the right to do it and they do. I feel like we miss out on great voices that way and the worst part about it is isolates me.

The issue of isolation came up a lot in our discussion, and it comes up a lot in his work. Myke doesn't want to be seen as different. He even hates being called a hero, which he gets sometimes, because he feels like it reduces his experience to a caricature. But he wasn't able to fully return to his old life because he came back from Iraq with PTSD.

MC: What I experienced was profound disconnection of being alone in a crowd of not being plugged into loved ones, I had this experience they hadn't. I lost my fiancé after second tour which was really hard, she signed up for comedy and she got a drama, each time I got back a little different, a little sadder, not what she signed up for, not what she signed up for and that's nobody's fault, but I'll never forget this was person I loved in the world, man, this was not some pro forma engagement, I loved this woman, she was my best friend, I didn't have to explain things to, that's what you get when connected do someone, I'll never forget reaching to I couldn't, God man, it felt like dying and of course watching her de-couple and leave – ugh. It was just awful. So if you look at 4th novel, Gemini Cell, the main character is an undead Navy SEAL, raised from dead and run on missions, wife and child still there, finds way back, he's still dead and she's not and that not even subtle allegory of PTSD, it is a bald faced allegory of the experience, but what did help was for me to frame it and express it five years down the road what was it like losing her I could hand book, I don't have to explain it to you, read this.

A common theme with your characters is accepting change.

MC: For sure, I mean Oscar is a guy who the army is whole life, and he loses it from no fault, he wakes up different, he didn't DO anything -- so yes it's about sudden traumatic change and reinvent yourself in the face of it for sure.

I think the military stories and fantasy stories are a good match because they're both about transformations.

And whether we've served or not, we all have our own wars to fight – whether personal or political, physical or psychological, mundane or magical. And if this genre can help us bridge those gaps in our own lives, then I think it's fulfilled its mission.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Linda Nagata, Taylor Anderson and Myke Cole – who says the military really does have a rule for everything.

MC: There's an authorized sneeze in Coast Guard.

What does it sound like?

MC: Same but maintaining three feet of social distance, sneeze into crook of elbow – not your hand, not your forearm but your elbow.

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