

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

One of the most requested topics I get is The Expanse.

In case you don't know, The Expanse is a series of seven novels – the seventh just came out this month. It's also a show on the SyFy network. They're filming the third season right now. One of the reason why it's taken me this long to get to The Expanse is because I had a lot of catching up to do – and I'm still not done with the books yet.

The Expanse is set about 200 years in the future – roughly the same time as the original Star Trek -- but I often call it the anti-Star Trek because Star Trek is all about human beings that evolve beyond their primal instincts. That is not how the guys that wrote the novels imagine the future.

TF: The thing that always sort of threw me out of the world building in Star Trek was I don't understand why anyone does anything because they sort of say well there's no money anymore. Everybody has everything that they need. Everything we do we do just to better ourselves. That's fantastic as an idea but it doesn't match any humans that I know.

That's Ty Franck. Daniel Abraham is his writing partner.

DA: But I would say in Star Trek's defense I think when Star Trek is at its best it's a different kind of fiction than what we're doing.

TF: Yeah and almost all of the alien species they meet are what we call monocultures. They only have one defining characteristic and that allows them to really analyze that single philosophical question through the idea that an entire culture only has that one thing. And really that's one of the things we work very hard to avoid.

Another thing they try to avoid is warp drives or other sci-fi concepts they can't explain. The Expanse is known for having really accurate physics. Even the effect of gravity plays a big part of the books and the show.

But what I love about The Expanse is that they've tapped into these classic archetypes – not the mythical ones like The Hero, The Mentor, The Monster. No, they've tapped into political archetypes that you can find in any

country, in any conflict throughout history. And because the story is set in the future, they can infuse those archetypes with as many character flaws as they want without offending anyone on Mars or the Moons of Jupiter.

It also helps the different warring factions in this universe are racially very diverse. ~~That may not be realistic -- even in the far future -- but it's nice to see diverse casting on the screen and the page.~~ And the kind of diversity makes the political issues feel universal.

But I really wanted to know how they created this universe, and what it has to say about the real world.

We will blast off just after the break.

BREAK

So the whole franchise started back in the early 2000s. Ty Franck got an offer to pitch a MMO, or massive multi-player online video game to Chinese Internet Service Provider. In other words, he had to come up with a game like EVE Online or World of Warcraft.

So Ty pitched this idea he'd been playing with for a while: what if our history of exploration, exploitation and colonization was projected into the future, into space?

TF: It didn't wind up going anywhere once the ISP realized that it would cost a hundred million dollars to make an MMO. They sort of backed away quietly but now I had all this material so I started using it for other things.

Ty still felt like gaming was still the best way to develop this world. But how do you create a game without money? RPGs -- Role-playing games, like D&D, where all you need are pencils, paper, and dice.

That's where his future co-author Daniel Abraham came into the picture. As one of the players in this game, he developed a character called Miller, who is a detective on a city built into the asteroid named Ceres -- that's C-E-R-E-S. Ceres by the way is a real -- it's so large it's technically a dwarf planet.

Miller is sort of an outlier. The core group of characters is the crew of a ship called the Rocinante. They're like grunts for hire. But they manage to

find themselves in the middle of every major space battle, which turns them into legendary figures.

Daniel was transfixed by the whole thing.

DA: There was this one session of the game that we were playing where I was up at like 3:00 in the morning trying to figure out how to build a new Ceres specific currency based on the accrued uncollected debt for the Earth banks and then use that to legitimize the government and I realized I'm kind of into this now. There might be something here. I'm writing to Ty at like the small hours of the morning about how to monetize debt into a new currency. This is interesting.

That's when they decided to work together and turn this thing into a novel.

DA: And I'd written like six or seven books at that point already so I kind of knew how to do that and I figured I could bring that and Ty could just tell me what the story was and it would be something we could do. And then we'd sell it for pizza money and that would have been fun.

Now Daniel had already made a name for himself as a sci-fi writer. Ty hadn't published a novel. So they decided to write under a pen name: James S.A. Corey. And they still write under that name, I wonder how many people know that James S.A. Corey is two people?

The amazing thing about their first novel, Leviathan Wakes, is how much they were able to draw from those gaming sessions. For example, one of the guys who was plying the game early on had to bail, so Ty killed his character in a really horrible way. And that scene makes it into the books and the show, and I won't say who character it is – but his death is really shocking because we're lead to believe he's one of the main guys.

I ask Daniel, why didn't they just eliminate that character entirely, why keep this thing in where they build him up and then suddenly kill him off?

DA: Well it was awesome!

Yeah, it's a pretty awesome scene.

The books got universal praise. And a lot of TV producers wanted to take meetings with them. And eventually, they decided to go with Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby, who wrote the scripts for Children of Men and Iron Man.

TF: Children of Men is a fantastic adaptation of a book but at the same time they were able to write Iron Man, which is also sci-fi but had a real heart and a real sense of humor to it. And there's a reason why all of the Marvel movies since then have used the tone and style that was created in that first Iron Man because it just works.

At the time -- the screenwriter and TV producer Mark Fergus didn't know that he had so much competition for the rights to The Expanse. He thought they were just inviting Ty and Daniel over to talk. Although he wasn't sure how it would go because Ty and Daniel had a precondition that they would be very involved in the show's development.

MF: They were expecting you know a Hollywood shirks and we were expecting you know territorial book authors and it turned out none of us -- we were just like hey how do we tell the best version of this story? And now it was just very much like let's just do this instead of put up all the artificial barriers of the territorial kind of thing that happens between books and screen.

Okay, let's zoom out to give you the picture of their universe.

First, there's the Earth. In this future timeline, the Earth is under control of the United Nations -- which may seem odd because the UN is pretty weak now and it has been for a long time. But Ty Franck -- the writer who first imagined The Expanse as role playing game -- he has an interesting idea how that could change.

TF: The only way that Earth would form sort of a unified central government is at the risk of extinction and Daniel and I are neither of us are climate change deniers. We believe that humanity really is at a tipping point where we're going to have to make some choices about whether we want to continue existing on this planet. So if you look at the show you know there's a sea wall around New York to keep the city from being flooded. When you go to Alaska it's the, you know it's the Anchorage archipelago because most of the coastline there is underwater. So that's where you know the U.N. really starts to gain some power. But the thing we always point out is even in the books it doesn't work well.

Now as I mentioned in my last episode, Ty and Daniel also imagine automation will lead to mass unemployment and overpopulation. Millions of people who want jobs and careers can't get them. So they head off to Mars to live a more rugged life.

And Ty always saw the Martians colonies as like the American colonies, and Earth in this analogy would be the British Empire.

TF: And the problem of controlling an empire that is so spread out is the same problem that Earth and Mars have at it sort of in the back story of the Expanse and that yes Mars is much less powerful than Earth has far fewer troops has fewer ships but they're just really far away and sending troops on a three month voyage is a logistical problem that is difficult to overcome.

Now Mark Fergus, who's one of the producers of the TV series, thinks there's a different dynamic at play. He flipped it around and sees Earth as America -- but America now as a fading superpower -- and Mars is the new rival which getting stronger and strong.

MF: The dying empire and the rising empire feels very much like China and the U.S. now is. These metaphors are helpful because they say history is one big cycle of the same freakin' mistakes.

The character at the center of this Cold War is Chrisjen Avasarala. She's the Deputy Under Secretary at the UN and she'll do anything to protect the Earth. On the show, the actress Shohreh Aghdashloo (SHO-ray ag-DASH-loo) totally owns this role.

CLIP

In the novels, her character curses like a sailor, which they've tried to do on TV but they're on basic cable so there's only so far they can go. She's much more prominent in the show than she is in the books. Mark Fergus says they felt like they needed a character that sees the big picture and can keep reminding the audience what's at stake.

MF: Plus she's a great character, so why wait?

When they first started writing the novels, Daniel and Ty based Avasarala off a real life politician – and it's a politician that I never expected!

DA: We were we were trying to have it clear that this was a future in which women were in positions of power and uncommented. And we were writing this in the era in which Rahm Emanuel was working in the Obama White House and was kind of famously potty mouthed. And so we borrowed him we said OK well what if Rahm Emanuel was a little short East Indian grandma? And that was Avasarala.

~~I never would've thought that but it actually makes a lot of sense if you know Rahm Emmanuel, currently mayor of Chicago.~~

CLIP: RAHM

Now there's an old question as to whether you get more results with a carrot or a stick. In the books, the character of Avasarala is all stick -- very little carrot. But on the show she's evolved into a different type of character -- someone who goes more for the carrot approach, and wields a big stick only when she needs to.

My favorite scene with her is during the superpower summit between Mars and Earth. A Martian Marine named Bobby Draper is testifying because she saw this strange creature she encountered that may be a biotech weapon gone rogue. And Avasarala can tell that Bobby's Martians superiors have coached her to hide what she knows, and Avasarala is trying to draw it out from her.

CLIP

What Avasarala is doing here is winning Bobby's trust and -- this is a bit of a spoiler -- but she does it to the point where Bobby defects to the Earth and that scene plays out like crossing the Berlin Wall!

CLIP

I asked Mark Fergus why they made Bobby's choice so dramatic on TV because in the novels, she can work with Avasarala and then go back home to Mars.

MF: What we said was Bobby's choice to join all of us or all has to hurt as much as possible it has to be betrayal. It has to be her giving up every thing of the life

she's built. You have to throw it all away and cross that border. And it has to hurt a lot for her to do that and it can't just be an intellectual choice it has to be a decision from which there's really no coming back.

It definitely is a way to draw out and heighten the themes of the book because both of those characters start out as being staunchly tribalistic. Their philosophies are Mars First and Earth First. And one of the reasons why Bobby and Avasarala learn to trust each other is because they've discovered dangerous warmongers among their own ranks.

And this dynamic also plays out in The Asteroid Belt – which is the third political power in the solar system.

Now again Ty and Daniel put a lot of scientific thoughts into writing the novels. They imagine humans born in the asteroid belt would become elongated because of gravity. Belters – as they're called -- literally evolve into a different type of human. But the Belters don't reap the benefits of the ice and minerals in the asteroid belt. They're stripped away by Mars, Earth and the inter-planetary corporations, which have arguably more power than either Mars or Earth.

TF: I mean that's today, that's right now

Again, here's Ty Franck.

TF: The countries in Africa that have the rare Earth metals that are incredibly valuable that for technology -- those countries are not rich countries the people who climb into caves to dig that stuff out don't benefit from it. And so the idea of a working class out in the Belt that was mining the enormous wealth that we believe is out in the Belt. They're not the ones who get to enjoy that wealth. That wealth goes to someone else.

Initially Mark Fergus was frustrated that he didn't have the special effects to create a lot of elongated Belters on television. Then he decided that restraint could be used to their advantage.

MF: You don't know what's in someone's heart just by looking at them because they may be a belter who's pretending to be an earthier or vice versa. We found that it gave us way more latitude to tell the story and find the best actors and tell the story of how it's hard to sort out you know where you want to be.

Now the Belters want to be an independent nation. So they form a de facto government called the Outer Planets Alliance, or OPA. And the big question is whether the OPA gets what they want through violence or negotiation.

And the leader of the group is my favorite character in the whole series: Fred Johnson. He reminds me of the old saying, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

Fred is African-American. He's a former colonial of the United Nation who defected to the Asteroid Belt. On the show, he's played by Chad L. Coleman, who you might know as Cuddy on The Wire, and Tyreese on The Walking Dead.

CLIP

Early on when they were brainstorming the novels, Ty Franck says the inspiration for Fred Johnson came much closer to home.

TF: The character of him is based on somebody that I knew who was had been a fighter for racial equality back in the 60s who is a friend of my parents who in the 60s he was a Black Panther. And had grown out of that and sort of become a much more measured person and it's -- saw the value in fighting for things that are important but grew out of this sort of fighting means setting buildings on fire into fighting means working to create the social change that you want within the system. And I think our Fred is that guy. He's the guy who saw what was wrong, saw the social inequality and is trying to be the guy who comes in and works inside the system to fix the things that he thinks needs to be fixed.

And here's Daniel, his writing partner.

DA: Also he's also an interesting character because he's advocating for a group of which he is not a member.

TF: Yeah.

DA: There's a real moral authority that comes from arguing against your own immediate tribal interests. And there's also an estrangement from the people who

you're advocating for when you take their story and their situation and make yourself central to it.

In developing the series, Mark Fergus and the other show runners felt like Fred Johnson needed a rival -- a more radical member of the OPA to spar with. So they brought in a character from much later in the books, a character named Anderson Dawes. He's played by Jared Harris, and he speaks in the accent of a working class Belter -- an accent they completely made up.

CLIP

It's amazing how much The Expanse is a Rorschach Test because when I look at power struggle between these two characters at the OPA, I thought it was a metaphor for the Palestinians -- with Fatah appealing to international law and Hamas saying violence is the only option.

But that wasn't the analogy that Ty and Daniel were thinking of when they wrote the books. And the show runner Mark Fergus was thinking of a different part of the world.

MF: I have a lot of family in Ireland still who believes the IRA sold out for you know a seat that kind of seat in the halls of power but sold out their real ideals and other people were like, "we're sick of the fighting, we're sick of the destruction, we just want -- everybody wants to move on let's find a way to join you know the game as it's played and learn the game from within. You know do we become just like them in order to get power and to be accepted, do we have to become just like them and how much of your soul do you have to give up to be allowed entry into that world.

So those are the three political power bases in this universe: Earth, Mars and the Asteroid Belt.

And then Ty and Daniel threw in a curve ball: a glowing blue biotechnology called the proto-molecule, which may have come from an alien species. But the question isn't who are these aliens and where did this stuff come from? The question who's got access to this stuff, and how quickly and effectively can they weaponize it?

DA: I think even without the alien civilization we would be perfectly capable of generating our own apocalypse. The way we used to talk about it was when we go out to space the most dangerous stuff is going to be all the stuff we packed with us.

Yeah, physically and psychologically.

TF: Yeah I mean in the introduction in the first book of the proto molecule and all of the stuff that it brings it just it's just a way to give humans a new thing to fight over.

And that's really what The Expanse is about.

Because whenever there's going to be a conflict between different political factions, there's always going to be moderates that recognize that the other side has other side has valid points and wants to negotiate. In fact the core group of characters – the characters that date back to the days when The Expanse was just a role-playing game – those characters are a Belter, a Martian and two Earthers that fly around in this ship together, and they're all great friends.

The problem in this world and the real one is whether moderate can negotiate with the extremists on their own side. And so many times in history moderates have backed away from negotiations and retreated to their side if they're worried about their own extremists could ignite a civil war. And the moderates aren't always right, it depends on what values they're willing to compromise.

But the big question that The Expanse is asking is how powerful is tribalism? Mark Fergus, one of the show runners, wonders about that whenever he thinks about climate change.

MF: I mean you can solve every one of our environmental issues we've had that we can solve those right now. If we could break out of our myopic view of what life is we could change everything. And right now we have the ability and why the hell won't we do it because we're locked in our programming as humans to consume consume consume and fight fight fight kill kill kill all of it and we can't break out of the cycle.

That's the other question the writers are asking. What happens when all of humanity is under threat? Do we have the political will to work together to solve our problems – knowing that if we can't -- it's bye bye civilization?

The Expanse doesn't have a solution. Even the two authors that write under a single name of James S.A. Corey can't agree. Here's Daniel:

DA: Well you know everybody thinks they're a realist right. Nobody thinks they're not. I try very hard to try to build an optimism I can believe in. And what that looks like is yes we're all just a bunch of terrible, terrible evil little monkeys. But we are also capable of moments of tremendous grace and the kindness and the compassion and the trust that underlies society is unremarked because we all think it's normal we all believe that that's how things just are. And so I think on that level I'm an optimist. I believe that the thing we are all expecting is a pretty gentle trusting world. And the reason we're all disappointed.

And here's Ty.

TY: I'm a cynic. I think we will continue to squabble over shiny rocks as the world burns around us.

DA: But we've been squabbling over the shiny rocks forever and we've done amazing shit in the meantime. And I think we can continue to bumble along including setting our planet on fire including which we are in the process of doing.

TY: Yeah but we've done with that terrible ship before and will continue doing terrible shit. But we have bumbled our way through. Up till now and I have a certain amount of faith in our ability to bumble forward. We're not the same guy.

DA: No.

I have that debate going in my head all the time – especially over the last year. That's why I'm always suspicious of the Silicon Valley utopian vision of the future where if we apply this technology or this solution to our problems everything will be great! It's going to be like a new Golden Age! I'm like, have you met the human race?

But the dystopian visions of the future are just too dark for me. I can't read post-apocalyptic novels. I feel bad because people recommend them to me all the time but I can't get more than a few pages in, it's too depressing.

What I like The Expanse is that they find a middle ground. Their version of the future looks a lot like the present. The cycle keeps going on and on. The hope that we'll finally get our act together is always just out of reach. But hey, human civilization is still around!

And my feeling is: All right. I'll take it.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Ty Franck, Daniel Abraham, Mark Fergus and Andrew Liptak, whose research into The Expanse was really valuable.

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