

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

**Today's episode is going to focus on the TV show Our Flag Means Death. It's a pirate comedy on HBO Max that's been a huge hit. I'm not going to give away any major spoilers in terms of the plot, but I will be discussing the premise of the show, and who the characters are.**

**Our Flag Means Death is not the kind of fantasy world I typically cover. The pirates on the show are not doing anything supernatural like in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. But Our Flag Means Death has a feeling of magic realism. Zed Seagulls can talk, if you give them subtitles. New Zealand actors are playing British characters without doing British accents. And the dialogue is very anachronistic. Sometimes life on the pirate ship feels like a pirate version of The Office.**

*CLIP: Congratulations on today's raid. I do have some notes though, opening speech went well, very inspiring, oh yes, I guess the big note is more energy! More swashbuckling! We're looting!*

**As unrealistic as the show can be, the two main characters are based on real people, Stede Bonnet, played by Rhys Darby, and Edward Teach, played by Taika Waititi, who also produces the show. In history, Edward Teach also went by Edward Thatch, but more famously, he was known as Blackbeard. And in the show, Blackbeard is already a legend before Stede Bonnet meets him.**

*CLIP: Look into the eyes of Blackbeard!*

*Wait, wait, you're saying that Blackbeard's head is made of smoke?*

*When he needs it to be.*

*Oh, come on!*

*And his eyes glow?*

*Yes.*

**In real life, Blackbeard's head was not made of smoke, but according to historians, he was the most feared pirate in the early 1700s. And he sailed with Stede Bonnet, who was by all accounts, the most incompetent pirate of that era. Why? That has been a subject of fascination and speculation for centuries. And it led to this TV show, which explores what exactly was the relationship between these two very different men?**

**And as I was looking into the history behind these characters, I became fascinated by the fact that there was a feedback loop in the 18<sup>th</sup> century between people who became pirates, and people who read stories about pirates. It's similar to the feedback loop between science fiction and real technology, but I never realized the same thing could happen in a genre that relies on fantasy.**

**Let's start with the story of Blackbeard. Until recently, I also didn't know Blackbeard was a real person. I thought he was a public domain fictional character like Sherlock Holmes or Robin Hood.**

**Manushag Powell is a professor at Purdue University. She goes by the nickname Nush. Nush has written about pirate history. And she says I'm not the first person to think Blackbeard is a purely fictional character.**

NUSH: A lot of people had that idea, not just that Blackbeard was fictional, but also that, uh, Yellow Beard was a pirate and Red Beard was a pirate and Blue Beard was a pirate. And if you kind of like stick a beard on something that makes them a pirate, you know, Yellow Beard of course was, you know, the fictional, uh, pirate in the Graham Chapman film. Uh, Red Beard is a villain on Scooby Doo, and Blue Beard, uh, is a fairytale villain who is not at all a pirates. So yeah, you're not the only person that had the impression that there's, there's something about the beard that just puts them in, in, uh, this can't quite be real.

**Also, Blackbeard shows up in so many supernatural stories. Versions of him have looked for the Fountain of Youth, become a master of the dark arts and battled sorcerers. He came back from the dead in the 1968 Disney movie Blackbeard's Ghost. He tangled with the Devil in the Saints Row video games. And in the Peter Pan prequel movie, Pan, Hugh Jackman plays Blackbeard. And he arrives on a flying pirate ship while singing Smells Like Teen Spirit.**

*CLIP: The man they call Blackbeard! (Sings lyrics to Smells like Teen Spirit)*

**Jamie Goodall is a staff historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington. Her favorite version of Blackbeard is played by Ian McShane in the movie Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides. And that movie was based on a fantasy novel about Blackbeard.**

JAMIE: It sort of speaks to this legendary myth that we have of him, of, of maybe being in league with the devil and, and that sort of thing. I also just like the way that they

portrayed him in terms of physical appearance, he's like scary but not scary. And I like that he's intimidating as opposed to scary, I suppose.

*CLIP: I be placed in a bewilderment there I were, resting and upon a sudden I hear an ungodly row on deck.*

**Jeremy Moss is a historian who's written about pirates. He says even people that know Blackbeard was a real person have created a fandom around him.**

JEREMY: I just got back from the Hampton Blackbeard festival, which is kind of the third largest pirate festival in the United States. The number of costumes that are based on Prates of the Caribbean are probably two or threefold of the number of costumes that are based on what a pirates would've actually worn.

***What was the Blackbeard festival? Tell me about that.***

JEREMY: Yeah. So, the Hampton Blackbeard festival is an annual event done in Hampton, Virginia. Um, Hampton is significant, or Blackbeard is significant to the city of Hampton, Virginia, because that was the final resting place of his skull. So, they now have a large festival full of reenactments, including Blackbeard's final battle. Um, they have a ship called Blackbeard's Adventure, um, that can sail around. And they've got a crew that, that mans that ship, that does these reenactments and, and dresses in period pieces.

**And Nush says this was all by design going back to the man himself, who was called Blackbeard.**

NUSH: It was unusual for a Western European man to wear a beard at all, even, even like a neatly trimmed beard. Um, even like pretty low down in, in the social hierarchy, laborers, um, common sailors, they would still shave. And it was weirdly, uh, linked to, uh, like racial and ethnic identity. So, the ideal was to be able to grow a beard, but you didn't want to wear a beard because that puts you to close to like Eastern European and Russian and Turkish Ottoman kind of fashions. And so, um, and so the fact that Blackbeard wore a beard, you know, I think it was a piece of showmanship on his part, but it was definitely saying like, I am outside of all your boundaries, don't mess with me. I've already decided I'm not going to fit in with the civilized, et cetera.

**And it worked. Blackbeard was a media sensation on both sides of the Atlantic.**

NUSH: A lot of the, uh, like extreme and shocking violence that he's sort of accused of doing in, in, you know, the Boston newsletter and, and other contemporary news sheets. There's no documentary evidence anywhere else that it happened. Um, he

actually doesn't appear to have been atypically violent for a pirate, which is not to say he was nonviolent. He burned ships, he captured people. He certainly killed people, but he got this kind of media reputation for unhinged frenzied, you know, demonic like evil. Uh, and that seems to have kind of been because it sold papers. So he was one of the first pirates who was a newsprint media phenomenon.

**But in the early 1700s, literacy rates weren't that high. So, Jamie says, people would read these newspaper stories about Blackbeard out loud in taverns.**

JAMIE: Yeah, you had individuals who would read out these stories, kind of like a town crier, uh, in the tavern and this, you know, allowed for information to be spread. And I also think that this is probably how some of the more like mythic or legendary stories kind of come up is that it's sort of a game of telephone. Like you hear the story in the Tavern, then you go tell your friend who goes, tells their friend by the time it gets to like the old lady down the street, it's something totally different.

**Before Blackbeard shows up in Our Flag Means Death, we hear the sailors talk about how fearsome he is. But when he finally shows up, he's a surprisingly charming guy. And he explains that he relies a lot on trickery. He uses smoke, sparklers and even ropes and pulleys to make it seem like he's a master of the dark arts whenever he attacks a ship.**

*CLIP: It's all an illusion! Brilliant!  
Exactly, or as I like to call it, the art of fuckery!  
May I have a word?  
It's a bit like theater, isn't it, Ed? The theater of fear!  
Ha! The theater of fear. I love that.  
His name is Blackbeard, dog!*

**I thought the writers made up the word fuckery, but it's on the website urban dictionary for deceit or nonsense. The show also did not make up the fact that Blackbeard used theatrical tricks. Again, here's Nush.**

NUSH: When he boarded a ship, he would use a lot of smoke to confuse people, which, I mean, that's actually a, a legitimate sea battle tactic is, um, you would want to fire broad side, close the distance as fast as you could, and try to board in the confusion, but that he would stick hemp under his hat and, uh, kind of light, slow matches so that his face would be kind of covered in fire and smoke, making him look like a demon out of hell.

**Jeremy says this wasn't just because Blackbeard had a flair for the dramatic. There was a practical reason behind the theater of fear or the art of fuckery.**

JEREMY: You know, I think one of the misconceptions is that pirates were naval tacticians, right? That they were very good at going out and fighting naval battles and taking ships in that way. But the reality is that they relied on terror in particular to scare their potential opponents into submission. So, they were very rarely getting into these kind of large-scale naval battles where they would have these, you know, kind of running side by side, canon fire battles. Um, and Blackbeard was the master at that.

**Jamie agrees.**

JAMIE: Oh, it was definitely a tactical strategy, uh, because for pirates, they didn't want to engage in hand-to-hand combat, uh, you know, it's cuts down on manpower when they lose people to injury or death. Uh, and also if you've got people fighting back, it's that much harder for you to get the goods from the ship. It was better for you financially and, and resource-wise to have such a reputation that people would be willing to surrender immediately. And they were basically giving the pirates, the, the run of the ship to get whatever they wanted. And the idea was that the pirates would spare them. ***It's funny because I was thinking like the golden age of Hollywood pirate movies is like, you have to have the sword fight on the deck.***

JAMIE: Right! <laughs>

***You know, like it's, it's not it's I mean, what, what, what self-respecting pirate movie doesn't have that and it's funny that's like, so it sounds like that's so historically inaccurate.***

JAMIE: Uh, yeah. Uh, it's not that battles didn't happen. Obviously, they did, but I would say they were probably more apt to use their pistol than they were their cutlass.

**So, there was a feedback loop between what pirates actually did and the fantastical stories people told about them. And that leads us to Stede Bonnet, the main character in Our Flag Means Death.**

**Before this TV show, Stede Bonnet was not well known. I mean, he had made a few minor pop culture appearances, like he's a minor character in the video games Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag. But Our Flag Means Death is his first big media spotlight.**

JAMIE: Before I started watching it, I got picked up by, uh, one of the grad students at the University of Cincinnati for a talk I was supposed to give. And she was like, oh, you do pirates. Have you watched this show? And I was like, not yet, but I'm going to

because Stede Bonnet is my favorite pirate. And I start going through his life and she's like, what? That's real? And I was like, yes. And she was like, oh my God. I thought they made it up for the show. And I was like, well.

***Why is Stede Bonnet, your favorite pirate?***

JAMIE: I think just because he was such an odd character, like he's not the kind of guy you're thinking of. When you think of pirate, he was a Barbadian landowner. Uh, had quite a bit of land, very wealthy individual. He was born into that wealth. And I just, I like to envision him just having a midlife crisis and rather than a convertible, he got a pirate ship and hired a pirate crew.

**And they did most of the work because he had no idea what he was doing. Again, Nush Powell.**

NUSH: The way he turned pirate is so weird. This, like, I want to emphasize this. You probably know this already, but like this isn't what happened. You don't wake up one day, you know, from a reasonably prosperous land-based job and say, I'm going to be a pirate. That is not what happened. Most pirates were already people who were at sea and who mutinied or who were captured by pirates and offered the chance to become a pirate and decided that sounded good to them. But he does it because he read too many books or something or midlife crises or, you know, he needed a medication that didn't exist for him at that point in time. Or, you know, something's really, really off there

***Or all of the above***

Or all of the above. Yeah. It could be all of the above. There's no reason to pick one.

***Well, see, my theory though, is that he, he became part of that feedback loop of people who consume pirate lore and folklore and mythology and wanted to live the stories.***

NUSH: Yeah. Um, and, and that's the other idea is that maybe he was reading the wrong stuff and his, his brain was kind of turned by, um, whatever it was. He was reading and there is evidence that he was bookish. Um, in fact, there was a library onboard his ship. Um, we do have witnesses who saw him, um, kind of walking around with his dressing gown on reading and, you know, not doing anything very piratey, but the other place you see pirates are, uh, romances, which were the, you know, the form of adventure fiction that kind of predates the, the modern novel of, of realism, so, you know, he could have been reading fiction too, um, and maybe had, you know, like romantic ideas of himself as a gentleman pirate or Robin Hood style pirate or something like that.

**On the show, we see his pirate ship library, and other details that seem like creative embellishments but they're actually true. Again, here's Jeremy.**

JEREMY: He shows up in a couple of scenes in a silk gown. We know that that's true as well. He was described in one of the newspapers as being walking on the deck with a silk gown. So, for a pirate that's different, right? Other than like a Calico Jack that would've been wrapped in Calicos, you know, he had pretty typical pirate garb and the silk gown would've shown itself away.

**And it was true that his nickname was The Gentleman Pirate.**

*CLIP: Why can't one be a gentlemen and a pirate? A Gentleman Pirate. Oh, that rings.*

**The fact that Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet met in real life was not surprising. The world of piracy in the Caribbean was fairly small. There were only a few island ports where pirates could walk freely and hang out in bars. What is surprising is that these two decided to sail together – and their meeting became a nexus point that changed their careers as pirates. Whether we can call that a tragedy or a farce is after the break.**

BREAK

**Blackbeard's greatest hits as a pirate happened after he met Stede Bonnet. That may seem odd but remember Bonnet had bought this big pirate ship. And he hired a crew that knew more about pirating than he did.**

**Before he met Bonnet, Blackbeard was sailing on a smaller ship, with a smaller crew.**

JEREMY: So it was more probably a trade of assets, right? You had Bonnet who needed somebody strong to captain his ship that had knowledge of maritime affairs. And then on the Blackbeard side, he needed a larger vessel with somebody that was ready to, uh, help fund his exploits.

***Yeah. It's kind of, when you think about from Bonnet's point of view, he come, he buys this, he gets a ship in this crew. He, he goes out there and then finds himself sailing with like the most famous pirate at the time. I mean, he must have been ecstatic <laugh>***

JEREMY: Yeah, 100%. You know, in my book, I talk about that quite a bit, that he's got this wanderlust that's created, uh, by reading these voyage narratives at the time, there's one called A Voyage to The South Sea and Around the World by a guy named Captain Edward Cook. And what's interesting about that book, and this is kind of what tied it all together for me is in 1996, they found Blackbeard ship, The Queen Anne's Revenge that ran aground near topsoil inlet in North Carolina. They have been bringing

portions of the ship up very slowly to preserve it. Among those portions are cannons. And within one of the cannons, the cannon fodder, right? The paper that they used to shove the cannonball in was preserved. They were able to take it out. It's a small bit of a book and using modern technology, they were able to scan the letters and they were able to fit it into the, to the actual book. And it's from this *A Voyage to The South Sea and Around the World*. You know, I've, I've made the leap in my book to say, look, Bonnet probably is the one that supplied that, that snippet, they were tearing pages at Bonnet it's book. We know he had a library on the ship, and if you read it, he was probably inspired by it because ultimately that's what he did is he got fear missing out, right? He got FOMO and he decided he was gonna chase some massive adventure.

**That is an amazing metaphor, an adventure book about pirates was the literal cannon fodder for his cosplay adventures with a real, famous pirate.**

**And In Our Flag Means Death, the writers imagine maybe Blackbeard's interest in Bonnet wasn't just mercenary. In the art of pirating and the theater of fear, Blackbeard was the undisputed master. So, what if, at this point, he was feeling kind of bored?**

*CLIP: You know how hard it is to find someone doing something original out here? It's impossible, man. And here you come with your library and your fancy quarters and secret little closet full of frilly shirts and summer linens and look at this, two chandeliers! That's overkill. An open fire, on a wooden vessel, surrounded by bits of paper! You're a fucking lunatic.*

*I know it all seems great but really if I could really be like Blackbeard, even for a moment!*

*(Scoffs)*

*Honestly, I would give all of this away!*

**Now, this is the biggest spoiler I'm about to give away, but it is something that's been discussed in many articles about the show, even in the headlines of those articles.**

**After their first meeting, the show explores whether the connection between Blackbeard and Bonnet was more than platonic. Nush says, this is also something people in real life have been speculating about for a long time.**

NUSH: The degree to which, um, we can understand pirates as, as kind of like a queer friendly working environment, um, is, is debated to an extent. Did pirates form



partnerships and bonds? Yes, they did. Did they have sex with other men? Yes, they did, absolutely. So yeah, two pirates could have fallen in love. Why not?

**And the main conflict in the show isn't the fact that two men in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have fallen in love. There are other gay characters on the show, and a non-binary character played by a non-binary actor. The big question the show is exploring is whether these two very different men belong with each other.**

**The queer-positive nature of the show has earned a lot of fans and made it a hit among critics. But there is a part of their story from history that the show has not dealt with so far: the slave trade.**

**Jamie says this may not be a conscious decision on the part of the writers because a lot of historians have endorsed this egalitarian idea about pirates that the ships were:**

JAMIE: These floating democracies where everyone's equal, including Black individuals, uh Black Africans, especially. And so, the idea was that they, these pirates would free enslaved Africans, uh, and, and let them form maroon communities somewhere or wreak revenge on their enslaves. But the vast majority of pirates are more than happy to treat enslaved humans as property and use them to get rich.

**And historians have debated Blackbeard's culpability. There's evidence that he engaged in the slave trade. And there's evidence that if he took a slave ship, he would free the enslaved Africans -- although many of those people were recaptured later on by enslavers. Blackbeard basically did whatever was most convenient to him at the moment. And there were people of color working on his crew, but there's a debate as to whether they were all there by choice, and how they were treated.**

**And when Stede Bonnet abandoned his wife and children to be a pirate, he also abandoned his duties running an estate that relied on enslaved labor. Jeremy wrestled with this aspect of Bonnet in the biography that he wrote about him.**

JEREMY: Bonnet inherited that estate. When he was six years old, his dad died when he was six, his mother died shortly thereafter. It was held on his behalf, you know, by essentially a, a guardian for years. And only a couple of years after he became an adult, did he leave this estate. I tried in my head as I was writing the book, I examined whether or not that could have been a potential reason why Bonnet left, right? Maybe he was very ahead of his time. And he was, he, he saw the atrocities that were happening on

his estate. And he said, this is too much for me. Of course, I didn't find anything in the historical record that showed that. So it's not something that made its way in my book or anything else, but it's a conversation that needs to continue to be had.

**Nush doubts that Bonnet left because he had abolitionist sentiments. Once he took over the estate, he had the power to free those enslaved people, but he didn't. None of that is talked about in the show. And while she loves how the actor Rhys Darby plays Bonnet with so much charm and self-effacing humor, she worries sometimes that he's too likable.**

NUSH: Like on the one hand I don't want to be a kill joy cause I'm like, it, it is a really interesting way that they put him and Taika Waititi together and they, they too, they're so sweet together. And part of me is like, well, let people have their nice things. Like, you know, it is a well-acted queer relationship and it's lovely to watch on screen, but it's also really problematic because you know, the, the way they've constructed that pirate crew is kind of multiracial and multiethnic and multinational and it's like this fantasy world where pirates are violent, but there's no enslavement. Spanish Jackie is like my favorite character. I adore Leslie Jones. And, um, she's so great in that role, but like the only Black woman we see, uh, is, is this, you know, awesome, powerful mob figure with what is it, 19 husbands? You know, a lot of husbands, although she gets rid of a lot of them over the course of the show.

*Do we even have to do this? I mean I set you up and left you for dead, and you killed one of my husbands, I think we're pretty even.*

*What do you suggest?*

*Plan C. Drinks?*

NUSH: And that's great and I like positive fantasy, but the temptation, especially with American culture is so strongly towards erasure of the uncomfortable parts. I'm not sure we're in a, a place where we're allowed to get away with this, there's no way to engage wealth in a historical drama that doesn't grapple with the problems of the triangle trade. And that's like, that's absolutely true of piracy. Piracy followed the trade routes established by the triangle trade. They didn't establish it. They followed it. Um, like piracy is in many, many ways, absolutely wrapped up in the history of Atlantic race, chattel slavery. That's not like the only thing we can talk about, but we, we don't talk about it enough and we haven't grappled with it enough, I think to give ourselves this pass, to have this otherwise lovely fantasy.

***Hmm. Um, how did, uh, Stede's story end, I mean, he was hanged, but was there anything particularly interesting about the way his story ended in real life that you'd really like to see them depict in the show when they eventually get there?***

NUSH: You know, I think this I'm going to sound like a total hypocrite. I think I'm like a lot of fans and I'm sort of hoping that they'll, um, you know, pull off some more fuckery and, and be able to sail off together to a, you know, maroon island or something and, and make it work. Um, but yeah, so the, the great thing about Stede's eventual end, he was hanged at the neck until dead as was prescribed but they did a jail break before that and go on the lamb for a little bit. Um, and, and were retaken and Stede, supposedly was dressed as an old woman to try to escape incognito. And I do think the show could probably, you know, make something fun with those details, given the, you know, the way they wrote the character as interested in, you know, special effects and measure domain and, um, spectacles to, to help him like escape and fake his death and all that. So, I, I think, um, you know, there's a bit of the, the historical backstory there that they could really work with.

**Jamie says Blackbeard's death in real-life was even more dramatic. He was captured by the British Navy.**

JAMIE: Blackbeard is allegedly shot five times and slashed with a cutlass like 20 or so times. And he just won't die. So, they cut his head off and they decide we're going to hang his head on the bow to, you know, show these pirates, like show his crew members what happens to you. Uh, but allegedly when they tossed his headless body overboard, his headless body swam around the ship a few times. So.

**<laugh> Wait a second. Wait a second. Um, is this like in the official reports from the British Navy, like, well, his headless body just rode around the ship <laugh>**

JAMIE: <laughs> I don't think it's probably in the naval records, but it was definitely a rumor that spread pretty far and wide after his death.

**Is that supposed to be like the virality of Blackbeard or the idea that he was like in league with a devil or something?**

JAMIE: I, I think probably this idea that he was in league with the devil, um, just because the whole concept of the black beard and the smoke and fire and all that stuff that he would use in his theatrics, I think kind of the idea was he was pointing to the fact that pirates were the devil's, you know, handmaidens that are not going to heaven.

**Nush is dying to see that on screen.**

NUSH: If we're going back to, you know, the art of fuckery as one of our dominant themes, like I'd love to see them pull that off. Like let's, let's fake Ed's death and let's have his body swimming around the ship. They could do it; I believe it. So, I would love to see that.

**And Jeremy is fascinated by this tension between history and fantasy.**

JEREMY: You've got these historical figures that have almost been Hamiltonized, right. I don't know if that's the right word, but basically, we have a moment in our, in pop culture that is creating historical figures into things that they may not have been exactly. What that I, I hope is doing is pushing people back into the real history and letting them dig in and, and figure things out. Yeah, we saw it happen with Hamilton. We're seeing it happen with pirates. Now there's a fine line between being a, a Jolly Roger, just a happy go lucky pirate and being a deep scallywag that was ultimately hung for his, his crimes of murder and robbery.

**One of the most interesting things about Our Flag Means Death is the way it questions the stories we tell about ourselves, what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget. And that speaks to the nature of having a fantasy. Some fantasies are harmless. Some are not. And when you're lost in a fantasy world, it's hard to tell the difference. Sometimes you don't want to know.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Jamie Goodall, Manushag Powell and Jeremy Moss. I have links to all of their books about pirates in the show notes.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.**

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