

## Previously on Imaginary Worlds....

### MONTAGE

*You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. I'm in line right now to see the Force Awakens, it's Sunday December 20, 2015. We got here two hours early and the place is packed but it is playing on so many screens right now it's incredible, I mean people are coming up and buying tickets this morning.*

*Now I talked about the first time I saw SW in 1977, it had been out for four or five months, when I saw Empire Strikes Back in 1980 not playing on that many screens, not that many multiplexes in 1980. We had to drive into the city to see it opening weekend, the line was so long it stretched around a fire escape around the theater down to the street and people were there for so many hours got incredibly impatient started banging on the doors yelling let us in! Let us in! And the ushers were like be quiet! People can hear you inside the theaters! And then everyone got all freaked out, oh my God, we feel terrible! And everyone got quiet. And then when Return of the Jedi came out in 1983 there were multiplexes everywhere and I remember my Dad and I got there super easy so we're just wandering around this multiplex totally bored.*

*I talked to Sonia Soraya who is a TV critic for Salon dot com who had a totally different experience from me. The first time she saw SW she was in junior high in the late '90s so she saw it on VHS.*

SS: You know, I would have a friend watching with me who would say you know Boba Fett has this huge backstory - you know you notice Boba Fett when you're watching it but I had no idea there was so much to him.

**What she means is there are these books and comics and video games that told the story of what happened to the Star Wars characters between the movies and afterward. I never bothered with that stuff because I knew Lucas wasn't really involved. His company just approved the writers.**

**But as a kid in the '90s, Sonia didn't make that distinction. Something else mattered to her.**

SS: I started getting into it my own, and quickly discovered how varied in quality all of that stuff was. That was a big part of me becoming a Star Wars fan was learning how to

discern things that were good and things that were not good even though shared same world.

**That became more important after *The Phantom Menace* came out in 1999. Finally, here was a new Star Wars movie written and directed by George Lucas himself, and...we got Jar Jar Binks.**

*CLIP: JAR JAR*

SS: I think that for a lot of fans, George Lucas ceased to be reliable and that's very destabilizing because he did create world of Star Wars almost entirely from his brain.

**Or so we thought. But these new films didn't feel right. So people started debating whether the "real" voice of Star Wars was Lawrence Kasdan, the screenwriter of the original trilogy. Or maybe it was Lucas's ex-wife Marcia, who edited the trilogy, and gave him really important script notes. Or maybe Star Wars had to be a collaboration of all of them, and John Williams -- and the original cast. Otherwise, it feels like fan fiction.**

SS: That's interesting. What's wrong with fan fiction?

*Nothing, but it's question I consider it quote on quote real or not. Someone could be writing great dialogue for Han Solo but until I see Harrison Ford deliver it, I know it's all made up. I have arbitrary limits of suspension.*

SS: Did you read Harry Potter books?

*Yeah*

SS: Watch movies?

*Yeah*

SS: Did you feel that the movies were fan fiction?

*That's an interesting question. To some extent I thought of them as extraordinarily fan fiction*

SS: And that's reasonable, at least you're logically consistent.

*It's true. As much, I liked the movies, I certainly never treated with same sense of authenticity as the books.*

SS: Right, this is endlessly interesting, you know the first Harry Potter is called Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, one things HP illustrates so well in our world right now in terms of pop culture franchises is that things are made in numerous iterations so close to beginning point, so with HP and Philosopher becomes Sorcerer, so you have weird split, after fourth movie, first movie comes out and already, alternative narrative before first narrative finished. I think so much of the Star Wars experience especially if you weren't around when watching them in theaters because now the original trilogy is just three bullet points in big universe.

**This Expanded Universe or The EU for short really began in 1991 when Timothy Zahn published a novel called *Heir to the Empire* – which was officially licensed sequel to *Return of the Jedi* that was embraced by fans.**

SS: One of the things great about Timothy Zahn books is that he conceived of them very much as another trilogy, there are three of them, they have similar cover art and titles to the SW movies and its very much the same notion of here are characters, here is ungovernable threat, here are the callbacks to films like, I'm not a committee, and I have a bad feeling, he incorporates those, they're a better version of GL's films, it's better than original so acutely aware of what makes them good, and then he finds way to embellish them.

**Before talking with Sonia, I did kind of a crash course on the Expanded Universe. So I'm going to reveal major spoilers so if you plan on the reading the books. Some of the plot twists I was like, you've got to be kidding me. Like the bad guys find Luke's hand, which Darth Vader cut off in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and they use the hand to make an evil clone of Luke called Luuke with two u's.**

**But Sonia loved the fact that Timothy Zahn let his imagination go crazy instead of playing it safe and being really deferential. For instance:**

SS: They find these animals sloth like on planet and they make bubble where force isn't active, so all of the main villains wearing frames that have these sloth like animals, (laughs) it's great! (Laughs) It's great they found a mechanism for making the biggest variable invalid, -- it's just fun to play with it.

**Zahn invented two characters that fans really love, and consider to be authentically Star Wars. First, there's the main villain of his trilogy, General Thrawn, who was flying a Star Destroyer on a deep space mission while the original trilogy was happening, and he's shocked to learn the Empire has been defeated.**

**Thrawn is a Machiavellian mastermind in a way that none of the admirmals were in the films. He never rose in to be an admiral because he's a humanoid with blue skin and red eyes. Timothy Zahn really spells out this idea that Star the Empire wasn't evil because they wanted to create order.**

SS: One of the threads that comes out in EU that they are xenophobic, they don't like other species, they would exterminate or marginalize human life that's why the Empire is all humans.

**Which makes General Thrawn an interesting villain, because he's not quite human but drank the Kool-Aid, so to speak.**

**The other fan favorite character is Mara Jade -- a redhead warrior who starts out as a Sith.**

SS: She's female character it would've been amazing to have her in original trilogy and also to see her in cinema, it's so sad we will never be able to see MJ become a cinematic character, because right from the she was Zahn's first creation that was a good creation, there are villains -- MJ started out as villain too but Luke, I want to say Luke discovers her because she's trying to kill him, and he's like wait, wait, you have force powers, but why kills me? Why don't you become a Jedi? I don't know, I have really compelling mission, He's like no, but like the force, da da da, I trained under Yoda for three months, I totally know what I'm doing another big that Zahn makes fun, spends 2 weeks on Deagobah and all the sudden he's a Jedi master, and MJ becomes his most fractious pupil.

**And eventually his wife and the father of their son.**

SS: So in those books it's a process of trying to defeat bad guys and Luke trying to figure out what next, killed father, discovered more Force people, instead of rebels but govern which is complicated, moves towards create Jedi academy which is huge arc and fails, you find out many years later, and one reasons addressed in Zahn books is that he was trained as Jedi for a really short amount of time and it doesn't work super well, but he

totally could get married to MJ. So that ends up happening with Luke, a couple other things.

***He has to fight Luuke.***

SS: He has to fight Luuke, that's a great moment in history. Han and Leia start a family, you know, Leia is career politicians, she didn't know she fucking had the Force, and all the sudden has brother she didn't know about and super evil heritage and the movies really short shrift Leia in character development because although she does cool things, they never deal with fact that guy tortured her and blew up home planet her father, and there's presumably emotional fallout that never gets addressed.

***Novels good medium to deal with this.***

Yeah, because there's an internalness, and interiority to them. So in addition to complicated world, now she's got this guy used to be career criminal he's trying to figure out what to do now that he's a legit human being, she's pregnant with twins, it's really interesting.

***You're making it sound more interesting than I thought it was going to be.***

I appreciated it. They definitely cemented to me the value of doing this, of telling more stories on top of first story.

***The one I always heard when people tried to sell me that one Solo twins turn to dark side.***

Yeah, super compelling!

***That's not until pretty late.***

Pretty late, I think it was one of the last major narrative pushes before EU wiped out, and it was kind of controversial.

***Really?***

Yeah, I think it's Jacen got to dark side, not because one of them goes to the dark side because in effort to take EU interesting things got very splashy. I believe a planet falls on Chewbacca's head, I think it's a thing that happens.

*From what I understand it was moon. A full planet.*

Still.

*That seems to be the moment the worst moment in entire EU when a moon or planet falls on Chewbacca's head.*

It's the jumping shark of EU. What's even happening even more? I had kind of written off EU at that point.

*And then Jacen Solo kills Mara Jade*

Oh my God! Does he actually?!

*I'm breaking news to you?*

As I said, I had written off the New Republic. You have to understand --

*This so interesting, I basically broke news to you in EU (she laughs)*

Of character don't exist.

*Of characters that don't exist, not that they ever existed.*

Now they really don't exist.

**Because when Disney bought LucasFilm – they declared that the entire Expanded Universe was invalid. Technically, they put it into an alternative universe called “Legends,” which they won't be developed further. In making these new films, they did not want to be tied down by this tangled web of storylines. And they would put out new books and games and comics, which take place over the same time period as The Expanded Universe, but with an eye towards setting up where the characters end up in *The Force Awakens*. A lot of fans were upset. But Sonia had mixed feelings.**

SS: So much of it was bad, that's an important thing to say as much as I enjoyed reading elements of it, just a year ago, by that point SW had become such an embarrassing footnote in my mind which is a sad thing to say but a combination of prequels and sheer

volume of not very good stuff that had become canon like planet falling on Chewbacca's head had eroded my original sense of wonder from the trilogy.

*That's a great way of putting it.*

SS: It's strange to know that it could be turned off, that's so weird. It's weird, I miss some characters, I miss knowing that this completely uniquely fan experienced.

~~*The weird thing is they're going to release new books exactly when Zahn books take place.*~~

Are they really? That's hard.

*Hard, huh?*

SS: Yeah, it's like you're diluting it, if you've taken original dilute it, and dilute it more, at some point like slightly tinged water, it's no longer Kool Aid.

*We're all craving more, like best meal you ever had and searching anything else that reminds you of that, a glimpse of that moment.*

SS: The way you framed it is such a depressing and accurate of how people search for meaning in their lives to be perfectly frank, Campbell wasn't hanging out with Lucas for kicks, I think there is this sense of this arc this hero's journey giving people strong sense of meaning or of significance or of value in that way and looking for original thing is hard because creating original thing maybe a once in a lifetime thing, and maybe that's why, there aren't so many creators that we can look to and say they really created something magical multiple times.

**I talked with Sonia before I saw *The Force Awakens*. One of the pleasant surprises for me was that the new movie *felt* like Star Wars – and I set a pretty high bar that feeling. I was also surprised to see so many echoes of the Expanded Universe, even though J.J. Abrams and Kasdan said they didn't look at those stories. Maybe there are only so many answers you can come up with to the same question of how to expand beyond the original trilogy. Again – spoiler alerts.**

**The Empire has to come back in some capacity, they need to create a bigger, scarier weapon than the Death Star.**

Han and Leia still get together and have a child who goes to the dark side. But in the Force Awakens his name is Ben, which was the name of Luke's son in the books. And instead than killing Luke's wife, Ben Solo kills his father. And the loss of their son breaks Han and Leia apart, which felt believable to me.

We don't know if Rey is the daughter of Luke or Leia, either way she fills the same place in the story as the "good" Skywalker daughter who has to fight the bad guy. In the books, they're brother and sister. It looks like they may be first cousins in the movies.

And just like the Expanded Universe, I think we're going to find out that Luke cutting short his training with Yoda had terrible consequences, as Yoda predicted. In the short run, Luke defeats Darth Vader and the Empire but in the long run, he wasn't qualified to train his nephew and prevent him from being seduced by the dark side. And so the Empire rises from the ashes because of this rash decision he made as a young man. That's why I think he looked so anguished in the final scene.

I know a lot of people thought *The Force Awakens* had too many echoes of *A New Hope*, but to me that makes the story powerful. Luke, Han and Leia think they're moving forward, but they end up recreating the past all over again, and it's kind of their fault. If it turns out Rey *is* Luke daughter, he probably hid her away on that godforsaken planet to protect her – just like his own childhood, which must have been devastating for him.

Going into the movie, I was certain of one thing. Han Solo was going to die. Harrison Ford had been very vocal for years that he didn't like Han Solo as a character. He wanted him to die in *The Empire Strikes Back* – but Lucas had to convince him to stick through the trilogy. There's no way he's going to sign up for three new movies.

I told this theory to my wife Serena many times -- so she was expecting it as well. But my brother-in-law, who's also named Eric, was stunned.

ERIC: It was obvious what was going to happen on the walkway but even so when he turned the light saber on him, I sat up and said, no! I'm really sad, I'm all watering my eyes are all wet.

*I also set it was going to parallel when Luke saw Ben, it's obviously going to be hers.*



ERIC: I want to like the movie but I hate what they did to Han. I mean I'm not going to fully cry but – (sighs.) I can't stand it.

*But there is that sadness and darkness and loss in every SW movie, there's a feeling of that.*

ERIC: But Han was Han. Kylo Ren wasn't that strong, he wasn't that strong of a character.

SERENA: I think they needed to do that.

*He knew he was a weakling dark side guy, Han allowed himself to be vulnerable, to get him to come to the light. But yeah Han was Han, he wasn't part of this epic Force, Sith, Jedi thing.*

ERIC: This is just more disturbing to me as a parent to have your own kid turn on your like that.

SERENA: Don't turn on your father.

ERIC: That was so sad. Ugh! I'm really upset.

*Are you going to want to see it again and again?*

ERIC: Yeah and buy the DVD and go frame by frame. It's heavier than I expected too much mom and Dad family stuff.

SERENA: I thought it would be have that and I thought it needed that because they needed some mythology.

**If you look at this whole storyline over nine movies it's about the darkness in this dysfunctional Skywalker family, and how it comes out in different generations – which is something a lot of people can relate to.**

**You might remember Rabbi Ben Newman from my third episode, where we talked about how sci-fi canons are similar to religion.**

BN: It's a powerful story to say that you as a parent were not successful, I think that's every parent's fear that your child is going to turn out bad. Look at all the parenting books that are out there. But I always say to Shoshanna...

**That's his wife, and my childhood friend Shoshanna, who's also a rabbi.**

BN: ...is that if anybody had it, had the key to raising perfect children and being a perfect parent, they would be a billionaire because that's what everyone wants, but it's not clear how to get there. And there's always going to be struggles between parents and children.

**It's right in the Old Testament.**

BN: Right, look at the Torah, you have Jacob and Esau which is this huge drama. And you go one generation back and you have Isaac and Ishmael. As you move through the Torah and the Hebrew bible, you have these family dramas happening over and over again. King David had a family drama. Solomon had a family drama. And you know that's just part of being a human being and that's also the power of these series, they're picking up on all those themes.

**I was pleasantly surprised how much wasn't explained in *The Force Awakens*. It was so refreshing after the prequels being packed with exposition.**

BN: Luke Skywalker didn't have one line of dialogue in the entire movie but everyone I saw coming out of the movie was like I'm happy with that. That's totally fine. I like the mystery.

**And I love the fact that this movie has sparked thousands of tweets and posts where the fans try to answer the questions left dangling.**

**J.J. Abrams, who directed *The Force Awakens*, did a TED Talk years ago where he displayed a white box with question marks on the side called the "mystery box." He bought the mystery box at a magic store when he was a kid. He keeps it in his office today. And he *still* hasn't opened it.**

*CLIP: What I love about this box and what I do, I find myself drawn to infinite capacity, and mystery if the catalyst for imagination, and there are times when I thought mystery is more important than knowledge.*

BN: It's the vagueness that is so intriguing, makes us love it. I think the prequels were too explicit, they were too, they spelled everything out too much, where this JJ Abrams mystery box way of approaching things, you have this question of what everything is, everything is very vague, you don't even know the main character's last name, you know that makes it so we can have these conversations and we can have fun with it. And to me that's the goal, that's the goal. I would say the same thing about Judaism, for example the Torah is very vague, great quote from the Zohar, Kabbalah, the Torah is written without vowels so we can interpret the words in many infinite ways, and that's how it's supposed to be. Any literature that lasts and is good, that canonical material has to be as vague as you can make it. And it makes us be part of the story and I think that's the ultimate power of it all. You claim the story as your own. I mean that's the key to it, when you're able to interpret a text or movie or whatever and create your own stories and your own theories within the story, it becomes your own story. And then gives you a huge amount of pleasure.

*Is there a – um, like the idea of doing a reset, a canon reset, I keep thinking of Vatican II and the edict comes up on high that something is no longer in canon, was there ever anything like that in Judaism, something people believe that is no longer valid anymore?*

BN: I think the biggest canon reset had to do with event in life of Jewish people destruction in year 70. The entire religion was a cultic religion a cultic culture, in that our religion centered around this temple. There as one temple and it was in Jerusalem and everyone would come three times a year on Passover, Shav'ot and Sukkot and they would bring sacrifices to the temple. And then in the year 70 the temple was destroyed and there was no temple. So the entire religion, the entire culture, the entire people had to be reframed. The stories had to be modified. One example is the Passover Seder. The Passover Seder is one of the most powerful Jewish rituals. Up until the temple was destroyed though, for Passover what you'd do is you'd bring sacrifices to the temple.

*I'm glad to know even back then there were Jews that only showed up to temple three times a year.*

BN: (Laughs)

**It's amazing that this story about The Force, which started out in the '70s trying to emulate religion, has evolved to become a modern day scripture in its own right – even though that was never the intension of George Lucas, or the corporations making money off it.**

BN: There's this great quote from the Talmud, which says that when Moses was on Mt. Sinai what he received everything that every wise scholar would ever say about the Torah through out history. In a sense every conversation is part of the evolving story of the Jewish people. So even conversation that I have about Star Wars and Judaism in this class, it becomes part of the larger story.

*It's funny I was thinking back to the mystery box, would you want to be in that position, to know the future of all canon?*

BN: (Laughs) Now that you're giving me that option, I don't know! I probably would not want to know the future of all canon. Maybe if I was about to die, I had this thought that the next movie isn't coming out until what, May of 2017 or something like that? And I thought what if I die before the next movie comes out? I really want to know what happens, you know? If I knew I was about to die, I would say yes, let me know it all. But if I knew I was going to live to see it then I'd love to experience what I'm experiencing right now, which is theorizing, filling in the holes, trying to make the story my own. But if I knew that I wasn't ever going to hear the answer, I would probably take you up on that offer.

**Me too.**

**Well, that's it for my Star Wars series. Special thanks to Ben Newman, Sonia Soraya, Serena and Eric Fong.**

**So I've gotten many new listeners over the last few months – which is awesome. If love the show, please leave a comment in iTunes. It helps other people discover Imaginary Worlds. Also, as you can see I'm going back to posting episodes on Wednesdays again.**

**You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. My website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**

**Oh, I forgot to check in with my little cousins Paulie, Sloan and Ruby – who were also in that episode about sci-fi canons. They were full of questions about the seventh movie.**

*CLIP*