

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

**In the last episode, I talked with Marty Cahill, who writes about fantasy for Tor dot com. And he told me this story.**

MC: When I was ten and I was eleven and I was on my birthday I said I had to use bathroom but I left to wander top floor of school waiting for owl show up and tell me I was going to Hogwarts.

**Which was odd because I was just talking with a woman working at WNYC, Kate Essig who is the same as Marty and had the story, except she didn't actually go looking for the owl.**

KATE: I think it's like when you buy a lottery ticket, you don't think you're going to win but you're still disappointed when you don't. I think that's the feeling you are when you're in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade and you don't get your Hogwarts letter.

KATE: I always felt a connection to HG as every bookish brown haired girl does. She had Muggle parents and my parents were total squares so I knew that they were Muggle parents and you get your hopes and you realize you were wrong and the only person you can be mad at is yourself.

**And the thing that most kids look forward to at Hogwarts is the Sorting Hat, which is placed on the heads of boys and girls, and it tells them which of the four houses they'll be assigned to.**

**In fact, there's a test you can take on the site Pottermore, which is officially sanctioned by JK Rowling. That quiz tells you which house you belong in.**

**The houses are based on personality. Gryffindor is for the brave; Slytherin is for the cunning; Ravenclaw is for the intellects, and Hufflepuff is for the loyal – I never understood what Hufflepuff was about.**

KATE: I didn't want to be a Gryffindor because everyone wants to be a Gryffindor and that seems too easy. But I love school and I knew that I was a Ravenclaw, until my junior years of college when I took the Pottermore test and I remember this vividly, I was working and we had a free moment and we're taking the Pottermore quizzes and I knew I was going to be Ravenclaw, and even as I was answering questions, knew that I was stacking the deck, so I forced myself to be honest and so when it said I was a Hufflepuff, I

dramatically shut my laptop and looked up legitimately shell shocked. I thought that Hufflepuff was very nice. That was the most you could say for Hufflepuff.

**But then she changed her mind.**

KATE: Probably the things most favorite about myself had to do with being a Hufflepuff. I love the people in my life, I love caring about people, I am intensely loyal. And Hufflepuffs aren't just nice. They care about people when they're hard. So now I wear it proudly.

*Wow.*

KATE: Yeah.

*Then I hate to tell you that I'm a Ravenclaw.*

KATE: Of course you are. Whatever! I'm happy in my house now! That's what that whole story was about! Finding peace in my house!

**Last year, I did a series on Star Wars, and how it shaped my generation – Gen X. And I've been fascinated to discover that Harry Potter had the same effect on Millennials.**

**And I find the Sorting Hat interesting because it didn't stand for me when I read the books. I was an adult, and from my perspective, the Sorting Hat was just another magical thing that J.K. Rowling had created.**

**And why would you want to be told at the age of 11 that your defining characteristic is to be ambitious, or loyal? Wouldn't you want to rebel against that kind of label, even if it comes from an omniscient hat?**

**Well, the answers I found surprised me. And they're after the break.**

**>> BREAK**

**I really wanted to talk with Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile. They're friends who met at Harvard Divinity School, and they host a very thoughtful podcast called Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.**

V: The motivation behind all of it is to respond in ministerial way, and we talk about the opening monologues as sermons, and we end with a blessing obviously so try to use divinity school training and bring to this project.

C: And I would say, Eric, sometimes there's a derisive attitude from religious establishment about something like this project, in the sense that, oh it's a children's story how compare to sacred text which has so much tradition? You know everything starts somewhere no intension claiming as new religion or anything like that but we want to say the text in our culture as sacred text because people have chosen to treat as sacred over many years and in places where they've gathered and we want to say if people want to do with HP or anything else, that has same value, the same validity as long as we do engage with it in community and with the same rigor as long as we believe it has gifts to give us.

*Casper, was your school what I would imagine typical English boarding school?*

C: I went to two schools, one was a typical boarding school, we had four house, I was day student other I was boarding student but we more modern but I still had a house, with house master, so to some extend it fulfilled traditional idea of boarding school.

V: Did you have to wear a hat?

C: We didn't have to wear a hat but we did have a school uniform and we did have chapel with headmaster in billowing cloak.

*It's so funny for Americans and people around world ultimate fantasy had experience with real things any other things that strike you as strange or interesting having had a certainly closer experience than he rest of us?*

C: I think the thing that stands out most from my experience is the house system and four houses and how much that identity means to you when invented in non-wizardly world it was random sorting but sense of house pride, cups, I was in Wellington, Drake, Nelson and Marlborough, all these great British explorers and colonialists but none of the less oh Wellington hasn't won cup in four years great shame we must reclaim it.

**Just hearing that makes me want to cheer, Go Wellington!**

**But there is a downside to sorting kids into houses. There's group solidarity, but there's rivalries and stereotyping kids who don't belong to your house.**

V: I mean the really troubling moment in book 7 Slytheran house as a whole gets banished from the war as if there is no opportunity for a single Slitherin to be good and fight on side of good, I don't think Rowling is saying that McGonagall is making the right decision in that moment, to me it speaks of Japanese internment, and these times

you we say you will not fight loyally with us because you are other. I understand can't figure out who's good or bad, but to banish an entire house? It's really disturbing.

**Vanessa takes this issue personally, because she when she took the quiz online, she got sorted in Slytherin.**

V: (Sigh.) I got sorted three times, I created a fake email address in order to sorted into Slytherin. I've always self-identified as a Hufflebuff and I sorted three times into Slytherin. I think that test is BS!

C: So this is where I come clean, I was sorted into Griffendor but it is wrong, I am definitely a Slitherin!

V: Yes, and I am definitely a Hufflepuff!

C: I think that matters way more than what a website tells us.

V: Thank you and that test, hi JK Rowling, that test is stupid! What owl would you want to take? What is a barn owl? How does that decide that I'm a Slythern? I feel very judged. I don't want to be banned from the war.

***Why are you a HP or Slytherin for each you?***

C: I know I'm capable of thinking political about situation, calculating and cunning which are great gifts if used well.

V: I certainly benefit from him having those gifts.

C: So I'm very much about reclaiming the potential goodness of Slytherins, no doubt for me it's a wonderful way of admitting temptations that I feel and Slytherns are interested in power and that's something I often take charge in group situation which can be very helpful but could get in the way, and so acknowledging that by claiming Slytherns identity is really helpful, takes sting out, gives is playful edge, can think critically about impulse.

V: I think part of I am claiming by saying HP I'd love to be known for kindness. I'm not sure I am, certainly if you ask my students I don't think I am, Sltheryn I feel like naïve one in a room who doesn't understand politics, I certainly have enough sinister to be cunning to be Slytherin, but I'm too dopey. I want to reclaim kindness as a good goal. I love animals. I feel very Hufflepuffy.

**Vanessa thinks one of the reasons why the Sorting Hat appeals to Millennials is because identity has been a major theme in their lives. This generation has been in the vanguard of redefining race and gender.**

V: And I think for Millennials as identities get fuzzier we're no longer introducing ourselves based on religion, where we're from has become a more complicated idea because we're more so much more mobile and we can FaceTime with families any identifier feels authentic feels authentic is exciting but there is resistance to SH because you hear people self-identify as Slither-Puffs.

**Although Slither-Puffs sound more like the name of a gross cereal.**

**On their podcast, Casper and Vanessa play voice mails from listeners who share their own stories and theories about Harry Potter.**

BRIDGET: Hi Vanessa and Casper, this is Bridget...

**Their whole thinking about the Sorting Hat changed when they heard this one.**

BRIDGET: Sometimes with the way the houses are structured danger not well rounded, Gryffindor spends so much time with Gryffindor there are rules spend majority time with Gryffindor, they don't know how to get into other house's common rooms, where would you hang out if dating house other house, the sorting hat see potential in kids and mixes things up, all Gryffindors are brave not personality trait. Hermione is shoe in for Ravenclaw but chose Gryffindor. Not more brave than intelligent so Hermonie can bring Ravenclaw qualities and Ron and bring Hufflepuff and Harry can bring Slytherin, if all three Griffendors through and through, they would not be so great as friends and staying alive.

V: And I think in treating the text as sacred, Bridget brought up an amazing observation which is maybe the Sorting Hat has pedagogical agenda which is not to push kids into things they already easily are but to push them into things they could stand to grow in, things they have the aptitude to grow but haven't yet, so the idea that Hermione shoo in for RC but need to get braver and stronger friendships is really appealing and that Harry could be in Slytherin but he does better in Gryffindor, and we see that Luna is a HP but grounding her because she has this fun maybe crazy theories grounding her in study and RC is good for her, I like the idea that the sorting hat is at a school! So it's not sorting for

career choices, I think it would be a different sorting hat if it was. But it's trying to teach the kids something.

**When we talk about the Sorting Hat, we're talking about the role of education itself.**

*Did you ever take those tests?*

EG: Yes, proud Ravenclaw!

*As am I! I thought you would be.*

EG: Yes, when you have dorks meeting you always have Ravenclaws!

**Elisabeth Gumnior (Gum-NE-or) is a professor at James Madison University in Virginia. She's part of a growing number of academics who write about and teach Harry Potter.**

**She grew up in Germany, so she has an outside perspective on American culture. In the 30 years that she's been teaching, she's noticed a difference in her students as they've gone from Generation X to Millennials. The students who grew up reading Harry Potter have a bit more reverence for their professors because they were heroes**

**The Sorting Hat may divide the students into houses, but she says the overall system encouraged a less self-absorbed kind of thinking because when Harry does something heroic -- his house gets rewarded. A professor will announce, "ten points to Gryffindor!" and the kids cheer. For a lot of Americans, that's literally a foreign concept.**

EG: This idea that what you do individually will have an impact on a larger group, that's something that in previous generations, that wasn't a very prevalent or even in some ways credible perspective. That was always seen as Communistic in some many different ways.

**She sees this change in the way students react to certain assignments and philosophies that previous generations didn't take to.**

EG: That is an understanding, a worldview that is much, much older than HP, and much more global than HP. What she shows us is a way forward, out of this glorification of

individualism. And I see that the Millennial generation takes that one much more willingly and deliberately than the previous generation has.

**Of course, there are a lot of other factors that influence a generation. These kids were famously raised in an educational environment that was trying to be less competitive. The joke was they all got a prize just for showing up.**

**But as I read the Harry Potter books, there was one question that always troubled me, which I asked Casper and Vanessa. What is this all for? They're not allowed to use magic in the Muggle world. So what else can they do after graduating beside teaching at Hogwarts or working as a bureaucrat at the Ministry of Magic?**

V: Or be a shopkeeper, those are the three options.

C: I like to think people go into the muggle world,

V: I agree.

C: I think they go into Muggle world, become accountants, we don't know about it.

V: I think that's what exciting about thinking there could be wizards in Muggle world.

***But if you're an accountant when do you use it?***

C: Eric, accounting takes a lot of magic.

V: You know, you cook dinner with it. I would like to think those really accomplished people who I'm jealous of they don't spend time cleaning because they clean apartment magically and that is why they can read every book and are beating me at life. Do you use your undergraduate degree?

**Good question. Literally? No. I was a film major. But in terms of the way I understand the world and solve problems? All the time.**

EG: It doesn't matter what job you have ultimately, the knowledge that you gain, the knowledge you gain, the skills you learn, nobody can take that away, it's more universally applicable than a specific job. That may also be a very European perspective because in Europe, PhDs don't automatically go into academic profession, here in this country almost requirement, if you get a PhD you become an academic. My father was

PhD and he was a journalist, I have friend PhD works for insurance company, in Germany PhDs in politics.

*Yeah, I'm turning in my grandfather are you going to do with that degree from Hogwarts?*

EG: Yes, shouldn't that be enough to help you. You know, their education is supposed to help them make their world better.

**And our world too.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Kate Essig, Marty Cahill, Vanessa Zoltan, Casper ter Kuile and Elisabeth Gumnior. You can like the show on Facebook, or leave a comment in iTunes. I tweet at emolinsky. And you can help support the show by clicking the donate button on my website, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**