

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about sci-fi and other fantasy genres. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Steven Schlozman is a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. And he's been obsessed with zombies since he was a kid.

SCHLOZMAN: I could walk to the theater where I grew up, I snuck into Dawn of the Dead 11 years old, told my parents I was going to see the Jerk. It scared the hell out of me but I loved it, first time occurred to me horror films could also have embedded social commentary – I couldn't have phrased it when I was 11 but I knew they were up to something in that shopping mall. And on top of that the thing that really got to me, it was funny, zombies on an ice skating rink are objectively funny, the ability to laugh and be frightened at the same time – that was scary to me. Then I had to call my parents and tell them I lied to them and I need them to come pick me up because I was afraid to come home and they were like, didn't you just see The Jerk. And I was like, ah, I saw Dawn of the Dead, I lied!

For a long time, zombies were a guilty pleasure for him, but a few years ago, his personal and his professional interests collided.

SCHLOZMAN My wife who is totally fine now was diagnosed with breast cancer, more than 5 years out but at the time couldn't sleep, kids were little, scared, up late, Night of Living Dead on TV, it occurred to me, I can't make cancer better, but I could treat zombies because they're not real.

So he broke down the zombie virus as scientifically as he could. Then he wrote a novel called "The Zombie Autopsies: Secret Diaries from The Apocalypse." George Romero – who made Dawn of the Dead and many others -- bought the rights, and they're now friends. But the real thrill came in 2014 when the Center for Disease Control put out a fake website about zombie preparedness and mentioned his fictional virus.

SCHLOZMAN But misspelled last name, piss off nice Jewish mother, called CDC correct spelling.

The reason why I wanted to Dr. Schlozman? I have a massive phobia of zombies.

The only zombie movie I've seen for more than a few seconds was Shaun of the Dead, and that was by accident. I was working at my desk at WNYC. One of the interns was watching that movie because Simon Pegg was going to be on our show. I know it's a comedy, but the images were so disturbing, I had flashbacks for year – especially when Simon Pegg's parents became zombies – and had to be killed!

SCHLOZMAN: Yeah, it's so freakin' dark. Vampires are sexy, they're libidinal, they make you feel special, vampire whole shtick you're sexiest thing alive to get to you, zombies don't care about, really disturbing that someone who used to care about you a lot, your grandmother who become a zombie doesn't care, she could care less because she's not she.

She's a zombie – a totally made up monster that could never exist in the real world.

So I decided it was time for some zombie immersion therapy.

BUZZ

Hi! How are you? Good!

I asked my friend Patrick O'Connor to come over with an episode of The Walking Dead. He chose the pilot.

PATRICK: I'm sorry, you've got to get over this fear of yours. This show is so good, I have a hard time believing you won't like it.

Patrick is an assistant district attorney. He prosecutes gang related homicides in Brooklyn. So it amazes me that after a hard week at work – dealing with grim stuff -- he wants to kick back and watch the zombie apocalypse.

PATRICK: This show has freaked me out, my wife and I sat still for a minute staring at the television unable to talk about what we had just seen.

Will this be disturbing enough for me?

PATRICK: You don't like zombies, this should be terrifying, disturbing, this sets the tone.

A braced myself – and hit play.

In the first scene, Sherriff Rick Grimes sees a little blonde girl that he thinks she can save – but it's too late.

PATRICK: She reaches for the –

The little girl...

PATRICK: -- For her bunny, she still retains memories.

<SHOOTS HER>

PATRICK: The death of innocence starts out this show.

But the show wasn't what I expected. I was afraid of zombies jumping out of closets to bite characters that we like – but it was more about mourning the collective loss of humanity.

At one point, Rick meets a survivor named Morgan, whose wife is now a zombie. She keeps shuffling back to their front door out of instinct. Morgan can't get himself to shoot her.

PATRICK: Yeah. Yeah, nobody takes pleasure in killing these things.

This is, oh my God, the cross hairs on her, it's almost reminds me of a disease, someone having Alzheimer's and being a shadow of themselves. Watch your own loved ones become shadow. Except here she's..

PATRICK: She's a threat.

Seeing them move so slowly it's so freaky.

PATRICK: The inevitability of it, the slow movement, you think you can move away but you can't because they're so many. It depends on where you are, so many of them, even though moving slowly, they don't stop, you'll run as fast as you can and they don't get tired, they keep walking.

And it's that moment of empathy -- looking at the walking dead and seeing their humanity -- that can slow you down, and be your doom.

But there were some thrills. In the last sequence, Rick rides into town, looking for survivors.

PATRICK: He goes into Atlanta with his horse – sheriff on a horse.

The zombies overtake them.

PATRICK: Thankfully the horse is there.

They're going to eat the horse?

PATRICK: Yeah, eating the horse.

Oh my God. Oh my God. This makes me afraid to go outside tomorrow. Like, I have no desire to watch the rest of this series. I really don't.

PATRICK: This didn't cure you of your zombie phobia, huh?

I know we have to eat soon, I can't believe we have to eat.

PATRICK: After seeing the horse's entrails?

You know we're eating beef tamale pie.

PATRICK: Oh, okay!

Like oh my God, it's so horrible, it's good but it's obviously amazingly well done, it's so depressing.

PATRICK: Yeah.

There are a lot of academic theories on why people love zombie stories. Some scholars have argued that zombies are popular after times of war, when we're contemplating mass amounts of dead. South Park did an episode where the zombies were a metaphor for homelessness. A few seasons later, they did another episode where the zombies represented Cartman's fear of rioting after the George Zimmerman trial.

Dr. Schlozman has a simpler theory.

SCHLOZMAN: I think with zombies, it's the sense we matter less and less, that's guy in front of you when stuck in traffic, not mean, doesn't care, so you can yell all you want you might as well yell at zombie doesn't care, get in front of you or not, depends on what grabs his attention, that experience of not mattering part of modern world.

A lot of people like the idea that the zombie apocalypse wipes out modern society and brings us back to the days of hunters and gatherers. The Walking Dead added a plot twist to make sure things stay that way. Anyone who dies for any reason catches the airborne virus and turns into a zombie.

PATRICK: How do you have society if someone falls asleep in bed and turns into a zombie in the morning and be killing people how can you have large society? You can't.

If you imagine yourself, who would I be?

PATRICK: I would hope I would be like Rick, he has maintained his humanity, he's been pushed to limit but maintain it but he has a real world ability to do what needs to be done, he doesn't let heart get in the way, characters who are all heart and humanity get killed.

That's it, that's why I hate zombie movies! I am that person. I am all impulse

PATRICK: All good

Not all good, I'm totally impractical I'm all about feeling.

PATRICK: Your wife says thumbs up.

My wife would be awesome, she'd kick ass, she's able to compartmentalize, this sucks I have to do it, every fault I have as a person would count against me.

PATRICK: This is correct, you'd be Hershel, have a voice of reason, let's do the right and every character who has that's voice gets killed, last episode most human character who struggles with morality of issues takes vow won't kill any human being, he tries to stop killing zombies, that character who is so feeling he's dead, he died.

How did he die?

PATRICK: Bitten by zombie while looking at picture the whole episode his death, very well done, he was dying, older character, he was, shows him coming to realization of comfort in passing over.

After he's been bitten?

PATRICK: While he's going through fever of dying and while he's losing blood bring up ghosts confronting him with decision and blaming him for death, he stands up and says no, I did the right thing, you're wrong. By the end, he goes into that quiet good night willingly he made a point, so poignantly, he was talking about his father, the ghost that he was seeing, no other character.

What's name?

PATRICK: Tyresse. Talking with character told him be engaged in the world, listen to the news that's how you hold on to place in humanity to be a good person, be aware, at the end when he's dying, there's a news broadcast and he imagines the ghost of people who died and the news is on, is talking about things the group have been doing, as he's listening just turn it off, just turn off the news. The ghost says are you sure? Are you ready to turn off the news. Yeah, stop the noise, and then he dies, really well done episode all focuses on one character and giving him good send off, that's why people like TWD, do that. It's a really well written show.

So I think I heard about my own death in The Walking Dead, looking at picture wanting to listen to the news.

PATRICK: Yeah.

I wouldn't survive a day.

PATRICK: Would you want to?

That's true, that's why a part of me wouldn't want to.

PATRICK: Why do we live? What's the point? If you're just going day to day trying to find food, struggling to survive day to survive get full belly, is that living?

Steven Schlozman actually thinks I could make it in zombie world, even though I don't even like living in a neighborhood where I can't get a good cappuccino.

SCHLOZMAN: Look I can't even hang a picture, I like camping but that hardly qualifies me for surviving, probably wouldn't make it but I remember Homer told stories, he was blind in barbaric times, he went from feudal lord to lord tell stories, gave him food, smart enough to not make it end, drag my family around give me baked beans, tell you stories and it won't end. We need stories, that's a big part of TWD, how much of old world to recall. The flipside, that survivalist ethos it is a fun one, the problem it wouldn't work, like ultimately humans need to worry that they're going to be attacked by hordes, we need each other.

That makes me feel slightly better.

SCHLOZMAN: Good, I'm a shrink, I'm glad to do that!

I actually did feel better. I kept thinking about The Walking Dead, but not in a bad way. I wanted to know how Rick got out of that tank he was hiding in, surrounded by walkers.

So I watched the next episode -- and the next episode after that. I skipped to the current season so I could see how the characters evolved. World War Z was on cable and I didn't turn the channel -- I watched that too.

I was like, I did it -- it worked! This is great because this genre is so rich with all these interesting ideas and stories.

And then I started expecting zombies to show up in every TV show I was watching. I'd flinch every time I saw a closed door. Or if I saw someone walking with a limp, I would seize up and cross the street.

I shouldn't have rushed it.

That's it for this week. Thanks for listening. If you've enjoyed the podcast so far, please leave a comment in iTunes -- that would be great. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds dot org. Special thanks to Steven Schlozman, Patrick O' Connor and Chef Serena.

The beef tamale pie was delicious.

CLIP: EATING.

Although listening to us eat – doesn't that sound gross now? I got to turn that off – I keep thinking about the horse.

Oh, Patrick's wife Beata has a habit of falling asleep to my podcasts. She says it's because my voice is soothing but I'm not sure that's a compliment. So, Beata. Time to wake up. The episode's over.