

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

It seemed like a terrible idea. Damon Lindelof, one of the show runners of Lost, was going to reboot The Watchmen, a groundbreaking 1986 graphic novel about retired semi-fascist superheroes. There already had been a Watchmen movie in 2009 that was a commercial and critical dud. But Lindloff said the HBO series would be a sequel, taking place 33 years after the events of the comic books. The fans were skeptical to put it mildly.

But Watchmen turned out to be one of the best single seasons of serialized sci-fi fantasy television I have ever seen. The rumor is HBO is not going to commission a season two because season one was such a perfectly told story. And spoiler alert, I'm going to talk about a major plot twist in the show.

The Watchmen is a superhero team with a deep history. Most of them are masked vigilantes with normal human life spans, so in the comics, we learned that The Watchmen had been cycling through generations of heroes going back to the 1940s. And the first hero in the group was called Hooded Justice. He wore a hood over his head with a noose around his neck, and gloves and a cape. And he was the only member of The Watchmen whose secret identity we never discovered.

The comics made it seem like Hooded Justice was white, but in a flashback episode of the TV show, we learn that he was a black cop named Will Reeves in 1940s New York. After he was almost lynched, he used the noose and hood around him as his superhero costume. And he wore white make up around his eyes, under his hood, to fool people into thinking he was white.

*You ain't gonna get justice with a badge, Will Reeves, you gonna get it with that hood. And if you want to stay a hero, townfolk need to think one of their own is under it. You sure you wanna do this?
I'm sure.*

SHAWN: You know, the origin of Hooded Justice was probably one of the best episodes of television, forget genre, forget whatever of ever because it's like that's how it would happen.

Shawn Taylor teaches at San Francisco State University. He loved that episode because it tapped into something he often thought about, but had never seen explored in the superhero genre.

SHAWN: Who else would be a mass vigilante aside from a marginalized person? I mean, if you want to think of like the, I mean, you are living under whatever conditions you're living in and you want to strike out, but you know, you can't go out as a woman, as a black person, as an Asian person, as a Latinix person. So wouldn't you put on a mask and go out and try to gain some type of, of redress from the oppression that you're under. And so for me, I always thought that like having so many white masked vigilantes was always weird to me.

John Jennings teaches comics at UC Riverside. He's also a comic book writer. He really loved the Hooded Justice storyline because it worked as a meta commentary about race and representation within the genre.

JENNINGS: He's already, he's like a black cop, so he's a superhero passing as a cop. But he's also like closeted, you know, uh, as far as like sexual, sexually closeted, but then also just the fact that you're black in America means you already have like a split consciousness to start with, so it was like, Whoa, this is like a, it's like one of those Russian dolls, you know.

What do you mean by that? When you're talking about how then on top of that being black in America, he's a double consciousness. How do you feel like that played out in an interesting way with him, with his character?

JENNINGS: You know, as far as like double consciousness theory, that's a, that was put forth by a WEB DuBois. Uh, in his classic, you know, Souls of Black Folk book, he was talking about the idea that every African American has, like there's a black component to our, to our being. And also there's this American side. And a lot of times those particular sides are, are at war with each other. So in some ways like when you actually create a, a black superhero, you're creating, um, the schism already because you know, superheroes are an American invention, they were created in America, you know, any represent in some ways, uh, different aspects of belonging, you know, and in our culture. So having a superhero that represents you is actually almost like a badge of being an American citizen in some ways. That's why it's such an interesting thing about representation. I don't know, I just think, I thought it was really brilliant personally.

The aspect of his storyline that really fascinated me was his lineage. The main character in the show is his granddaughter, a masked vigilante called Sister Night. We also learn that Will Reeves or Hooded Justice was inspired by a legendary Wild West hero named Bass Reeves – who might be his grandfather. There's actually a fake silent movie in the show that looks totally authentic. It was Will Reeves's favorite movie as a kid.

And they're in front of the church now, and the townfolks run out to see what's up. The man in black says the sheriff is a cattle thief. He says he's Bass Reeves, the black Marshall of Oklahoma, he throws back his hood, the townfolk cheer.

But Bass Reeves is not a fictional character. He was a real person from history, and his story have inspired the superhero genre itself. And the way his legacy was whitewashed highlights a lot of issues around race, representation and the question of who gets to tell your story.

Art Burton wrote a book about Bass Reeves. He also grew up in Oklahoma, where the Watchmen TV series is set. Art comes from a long line of black cowboys. In fact, he says about a fifth of all cowboys on the frontier were black, not that you'd know it from Hollywood Westerns.

He says Bass Reeves even has a perfect origin story.

ART: Yeah. He was a, uh, a slave, his slave master, was an officer in Texas regiment 11 Texas Calvary regiment. And he was a body servant and they were playing cards while they were playing cards. Bass got upset and thought he was being cheated. And so he knocked his master out, and in Texas for a slave to hit his master that was punishable by death.

But he managed to escape. And the only place he could hide was living among Native Americans, where he acquired a unique set of skills.

ART: Well, he learned a lot about riding horses and different ways to make himself look small or large at a distance. Uh, he learned to a master firearm, pistols, rifles. He became ambidextrous with his weapons. He learned to work in disguise. He, that was regular M.O.

When the Civil War broke out, he fought for the Union. Afterwards became a U.S. Marshall in what was called "the Indian territories," which were territories like Oklahoma that hadn't become states yet. Being a U.S. Marshall on the frontier was a very dangerous job with a high turnover rate. But he lasted over 30 years until he retired without a scratch.

ART: Most deputies would bring back three or four people at a time. Bass we'll bring back 10, 11, 12 at a time. If he went after you, he was going to catch you. If you tried to hide from him, he would find you. And if you tried to shoot it out with him, he was going to kill you. and they say they say he killed 14 man well at the time he died, there was 3

or 4 newspapers, stated he killed over 20 men in the land of duty. But he wasn't proud of killing people. He was more proud of his detective skills. They were singing songs about him, that big of a legendary status in Indian territory. It was one of those American folk heroes that we've had that, you know, this, he got kind of lost in the mix. But I think now we can celebrate him and it can be a role model for anybody, tries to overcome adversity. I think he can be a role model for anybody who wants to do, right.

Yeah, I mean, God, you're basically describing a superhero.

ART: The word that I kept thinking of. Exactly, and that's what he was, he was super hero. It was definitely his, his life almost reads like a comic book. Well, you know.

If you're thinking, he almost sounds like The Lone Ranger, that's not a coincidence. Art thinks Bass Reeves was the inspiration for The Lone Ranger – and that character inspired many other fictional heroes.

ART: He's the closest person in reality to be similar to the lone ranger. He wrote a white horse. The one time he worked in disguise, such as the lone ranger. He was mandated by federal law to have a posse men, at least one with him. Whenever he went to the field, he had an Indian with him many times. He went into the field a long range of handed out silver bullets. Bass Reeves handed out silver dollars. People didn't remember his name. They just call it in the black Marshall, you know, who was that masked man? The Lone Ranger's name was Reid, very close to Reeves.

He was also a morally righteous person to the point where he arrested his own son for murder.

ART: And they put a warrant out for his arrest. And Bass told the U S marshal that he didn't want any Marshalls to get hurt arresting his son and give him the warrant. He would do it, so he arrested his own son for murder.

This story may seem too good to be true, but Art connected me with a professor at the University of Wyoming, who verified that the daughter of Fran Striker, the writer of The Lone Ranger radio series, said that her father knew about a legendary black Marshall who often wore a disguise and rode with a Native American sidekick.

While Bass Reeves was a legend in his day – and frankly a more interesting character than The Lone Ranger – it's The Lone Ranger who ended up being an icon. It's not hard to guess why.

In fact, part of the reason why Bass Reeves thrived was because he oversaw territories that hadn't achieved statehood. When territories like Oklahoma became states, institutionalized segregation was established, and he was wiped off the history books until the 1970s, when he was rediscovered by historians.

Interestingly the 1970s was also a time when the superhero genre became more diverse adding all these black superheroes. When he was a kid, Shawn Taylor liked those characters, but he could tell the writers were white.

SHAWN: I think the introduction of black superheroes was always more like, it was like blaxploitation but in comments, like it's Black Panther and Black Goliath. I was like, wow, dude, do we have to add that we have to add the, the descriptor black in front of everything. For me, what happened was when Storm came in in John's X-Men when they introduced Storm, it was just like a black woman character who didn't have some type of racial signifier approach to her name. And it was just this amazing thing that was not attached to any other thing that came before it.

Well it's funny because DC had Black Lightning who is, you know, she could have been Black Storm.

SHAWN: Yeah. And it, it, it's, once again it was, it removed itself from having the descriptor of black achievers became this fully formed hero who's controlling the weather and has a relationship to Africa. That wasn't like mythologized like Black Panther was a Wakanda, you know, it wasn't like this like this so far to the left that where it was like, Oh yeah we can accept this because it's so far out of the realm of possibility. And so for me it was for me the whole idea of black superheroes really hit home with Storm.

That's interesting. Cause, I mean everyone's been praising Black Panther on so many levels. So, it's, it's interesting to hear that, that, you know, when you were younger and you know, just a kid into comics that Wakanda and Black Panther didn't really want to sit well as well with you.

SHAWN: I mean, he fought the Klan, that was amazing, but there was still something even like almost overly noble and how they wrote his, you know, his dialogue, it was almost a caricature. I mean not to say that. And they'll take away with, you know, like Kirby and Lee, you know, people who worked on Black Panther. But it was so like, it felt really like almost like a recipe. Like here's how you make a noble black character, add hyper diction, add Africa, add black. And it felt like, it doesn't feel authentic to me the way Storm did.

John Jennings agrees. Some of the attempts by white writers to create black superheroes weren't that bad.

JENNINGS: You know, honestly a character like, like a, like Black Panther. When Don McGregor was writing Black Panther, it was really well done. Cause you know, he was, he was very serious about representing the character well and same thing that with Tony Isabella, I mean I think Black Lightning is an aspirational character and I think it's well constructed. You know, so, um, but I think Luke Cage to me, or like Black Goliath or some of the villains in, in Luke Cage were also like, Whoa, what were you thinking with this? Or the fact that his cuss word or his catch phrase was Sweet Christmas, you know, like, I think they got it from like our Chester Himes novel, but I was like, that still doesn't sound like cool and it shouldn't, you know what I'm saying?

When black writers started taking over those characters in the 2000s, he felt the change immediately.

JENNINGS: There's a sense of resonance with them. Like for instance, you can look at like, um, you know, Reginald Hudlin's run on Black Panther or like, uh, Christopher Priest, Ronald Black parents are, they're both excellent because they are, they're both after American writers. They've been in the comics industry; they've been in like the content production industry for a long time. They understand the pitfalls of, they know the history of like how black characters have been kind of portrayed and various media. And you can definitely tell, they really are taking into effect that the culture is, you know, the cultural, uh, kind of affect is different. It's very different. And I think I can see that sometimes when you see, you know, black creators working with black characters.

But he thinks black writers have the most freedom with independent comics like Brotherman or Black, which is a series that imagines what if only black people had superpowers.

JENNINGS: There's a little bit more of a spectrum of like what you can do when you're independent that you can't do when you actually look behold into a giant company like Disney or Warner brothers, right. Where it's like you're not on message. Right. They, working for those characters can be really exciting, but also extremely eliminating because you have all of this continuity that you gotta deal with. You have all these different shareholders you gotta deal with. And a lot of times you're getting like totally rewritten by your editors. Right. Whereas like if you're, if I want to do another version of The Hole, which is one of my characters made, I did create it decorated with Damian Duffy, then I can go in on different issues, you know, with no oversight and it's actually be more free freely to express a spectrum of experiences. So I think that's probably one of the biggest thing. Everybody wants to work for those big companies. But then once you get there you're like, Whoa, I feel like I'm, I have handcuffs on now. You know what I'm saying? So yes, it's a, it's a tradeoff. You know.

Watchmen did have a white show runner, Damon Lindloff, but he made sure his staff was mostly people of color -- including Cord Jefferson, who wrote that Hooded Justice flashback episode. And Watchmen got a lot of praise from black fans, but Shawn says there was some discussion as to whether it's okay use real traumatic events from history as fodder for a sci-fi fantasy world.

SHAWN: I am on the opposite side. I think that if you can, if you can introduce real black history through spectacular popular culture, I think you're doing the memories of those two. Are things a great service? But I think it's really important that we start introducing or re-introducing true American history for all of our citizens, so we can actually have a fuller picture of heroism and sacrifice that is the foundation of this very country.

Now there is one caveat to this story about Bass Reeves inspiring The Lone Ranger, and eventually the superhero genre. There is another theory that The Lone Ranger was inspired by a masked vigilante from a different marginalized community – in fact maybe two different masked vigilantes from history. And that story also echoes many of the same issues around race and representation in the genre today.

That's just in a moment.

SEG B

I mentioned that The Lone Ranger may have been inspired by a different historical figure. It's actually a bit more complicated than that. A lot of people think The Lone Ranger was based off the character of Zorro, who was based off a real people from Mexican American history.

That is a lot to unpack. So, let's start with The Lone Ranger.

The Lone Ranger was created by the writer Fran Striker and his boss at the radio station, George Washington Trendle. I've talked with cultural historians who disagree about whether Striker or Trendle was the real creative force behind The Lone Ranger. Striker may have known about Bass Reeves. But that wasn't true for his boss, George Trendle, or other writers on the show.

VALADEZ: George Washington Trendle and his writers really looked to Zorro as the inspiration for the lone ranger.

John Valadez is a professor at Michigan State University. Growing Mexican American on the West Coast, he always loved Zorro as a character. And there's a strong case to make that Zorro was the real inspiration for The Lone Ranger, and the entire superhero genre. Batman was based on Zorro.

Now Zorro appeared in a 1919 novel called The Curse of Capistrano, by Johnston McCulley, and Johnston McCulley was obsessed with California history.

VALADEZ: That's how he created Zorro, which was based on his reading of, of, of Mexican history and the history of the American West, which fascinated him.

Who was Zorro based on? That's where things get really interesting.

Let's take one more leap back in time to 1848. The U.S. fought a war against Mexico and took California. Also, that same year, gold was discovered in California.

People from the East Coast and the Mid-West slowly made their way to the West Coast to mine for gold. Meanwhile Mexicans -- now Mexican Americans -- were already there with plenty of time to dig up the gold. And other Mexicans were crossing over the border -- the brand-new California border -- to look for gold as well. By the time Anglo-Americans arrived in California, most of the gold was taken.

VALADEZ: So, these Americans looked at these Mexicans pulling out this gold, and they were like, what the hell are you doing here? You lost the war, go back to Mexico. You don't belong here. What they did is they first started, you know, pushing them out. And then when there was resistance, then it turned into open warfare.

There are two people from this time who are probably the inspiration for Zorro. The first is Juakin Murietta. He was part of that early wave of Mexicans who crossed the border looking for gold. During the race war that followed, his family was wiped out. He was left for dead. But he survived and dedicated himself to seeking justice, or revenge.

VALADEZ: There were little newspapers all throughout the gold country. And, um, and there began appearing in these stories all over the place that says, you know, Juakin and his band has done another raid and killed five people, you know, in French camp. And then it got so frantic with these, um, with Juakin appearing in all of these newspapers that sometimes it even came up that he had murdered somebody in Los

Angeles and somebody in San Francisco and somebody in Sacramento all on the same day.

On one hand, it sounds like white people couldn't tell one Mexican from another. But Murietta also became a symbol, inspiring other Mexican Americans. And the media built up his legend, making him larger than life.

VALADEZ: They, they, they, various elements were introduced. They would say that, uh, that Juakin wore this, this cape, you know, on a hat that had his face and they would say that Juakin spoke perfect English. So you couldn't tell that he was Mexican or Anglo or what he was, and that sometimes he would wear disguises. He would appear as an old man, or he would appear as a, as a, as an old woman. And so you never knew when he would strike or, or you know, you always had to be on your guard. And it was said that he had this extraordinary horsemanship and that he would, after killing somebody who would disappear into the darkness as though he were a Phantom and no one was able to track him down, he seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once.

Eventually the governor called on the California Rangers to capture him. They did, we assume, no one really knew what he looked like. But they came back with a severed human head, claiming it was Murietta. And they put the head on display, charging people five bucks to see it.

Now that's a pretty grim story. Zorro is a fun swashbuckling adventure.

That's why historians point to another figure Zorro may have been based on, a man named Tiburcio Vasquez. And the story of Tiburcio Vasquez also plays out like a superhero origin.

VALADEZ: Vasquez had come from this upper crust family. He was well-educated. He wrote poetry. He was something of a dandy. He dressed in very fine clothes, even though it was the front gear. They were very wealthy. They had, you know, vast, uh, you know, lands and ranches and et cetera, et cetera. And as the Americans began to come in during the gold rush, Vasquez kept having run-ins, like many Mexicans or Mexican Americans now, uh, with the Anglos who discriminated against him. And he always saw himself as a very erudite, you know, sophisticated figure.

When the white sheriff was killed, Vasquez was accused of murder even though he swore he was innocent.

JOHN: He had to basically run for his life. And like Murietta, he began to don, and wear a cape and he became again now this elusive figure who would hijack Americans who were on the highway and steal from them, you know, as a kind of a revenge. Although Vasquez claimed to never have killed anybody. He was famous for leaving Americans hogtied with their faces in the dirt. That was kind of his trademark. And he did this for 20 years.

The hogtie thing is similar to Zorro's trademark, slicing a Z into the flesh of his victims. But in the books and the movies, Zorro isn't on the run. He's a wealthy playboy during the day.

VALADEZ: But at night he would then transform into this mythical figure who would wear a mask and he would go and defeat the Spanish authorities who are abusing the poor, the Indians, the women, et cetera.

That's the other big difference. The legend of Zorro takes place before the U.S. captured California. So, the villains are Mexican.

Now, we have two origin stories here – one origin story for The Lone Ranger and two possible origin stories for Zorro. In first case, the hero is changed from black to white. In the other case, the villains are changed from white to brown. And most of the Hollywood actors to play Zorro were white.

This history of whitewashing superheroes is so common, it even happened with the All-American Boy Scout, Superman. That character really began out as a refugee, an immigrant. And John Jennings says look at the two guys that created Superman in the 1930s, Seigel and Schuster.

JENNINGS: If you think about what Superman comes from, you have these two Jewish teenagers, one of which who loses his father. And I, and I and I, an act of burglary, you know, who dies of a heart attack because of being robbed. You know, there's an aspirational aspect. I want to do something for my country and I can't, I want to, I want to fit in and I want to stop this stuff from happening around me. So you create a character that can do it. Kal-El is his essentially his home, that's the name he was named on his home planet, very Hebraic sounding to a certain degree, and little by little he becomes an assimilationist narrative.

Yeah, and Superman started out as a more progressive, New Deal type of character, like in his early comics, he's fought a slumlord, and he fought a war profiteer.

JENNINGS: That's right. Yeah. He's more, and he's less powerful. He's not, he's leaping from tall buildings, you know, he's leaping, you know, he's not flying. And he stands for truth and justice and he doesn't stand for truth, justice and the American way until after the Second World War and after the TV show.

The phrase absolute power corrupts absolutely did not come up much in superhero comics for most of the 20th century. The fantasy of the superhero is you can have it both ways -- absolute power and absolute goodness.

That's what made Watchmen so groundbreaking in the 1980s, it was one of the first comics to ask whose idea of truth and justice are they fighting for? And who defines The American Way? What made the Watchmen TV show so interesting was that they layered the issue race and representation on top of those questions. Again, Shawn Taylor:

SHAWN: Honestly that's why so many, um, black and Brown, Asian kids gravitate towards superheroes because, wow, I could get justice and then be lauded for getting justice as opposed to being demonized for wanting justice.

And John Valadez says the mask, the disguise is the key superhero genre.

VALADEZ: So, it's not on any individual. It could be any of us, any, anybody could be The Lone Ranger. Could be, you could be me, anybody could be Zorro. We all have within us that we too could be somebody who stands up against injustice when we see it. And I think there's something fundamentally beautiful that echoes across race, across class and across time that speaks to what it is to be fundamentally human.

What makes superheroes so appealing to me is that when you're reading a comic, or watching them on screen, there's no doubt what is truth or what is justice. And it feels really satisfying. Although my favorite superhero stories find a way of incorporating the ugly aspects of our society with the hope that we can make things better. And knowing our history -- tracing these types of characters back to the real people that inspired -- can help give us more clarity on the nature of truth, justice and The American Way.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Art Burton, Shawn Taylor, John Jennings and John Valadez. By the way, if you're curious to learn more about The Lone Ranger and its racial politics, I did an episode about Tonto as part of mini-series on sidekicks last year.

Also, if you live in the New York area and you've always wanted to have your own podcast, I'm teaching a class at NYU this spring. Classes begin Thursday March 12th. There are only a few spots left. It's called Creating a Narrative Podcast and it's on the NYU website.

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

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