

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 show is an experiment. First, it's going to feature a radio drama that mixes reality and fantasy. Also its is going to sound different from my usual episode because it is a full on co-production with one of my favorite podcasts, Here Be Monsters from KCRW. To give you a taste of that show, this is the creator of that show, Jeff Emtman, does his introduction.

HERE BE MONSTERS. A SHOW ABOUT...A SHOW ABOUT THE UNKNOWN.

When it comes to monsters, there's one that I've been curious for a long time. It's called Cthulhu [ka-THOO-loo]. It's a very old monster of unimaginable size that sleeps on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, and if it were to rise – that could be the end of the world. Cthulhu is all over pop culture from horror stories to role-playing games and video games to South Park. The writer who first imagined it was Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

READING: The figure, which was finally passed slowly from man to man for close and careful study, was between seven and eight inches in height, and of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. This thing, which seemed instinct with a fearsome and unnatural malignancy, was of a somewhat bloated corpulence, and squatted evilly on a rectangular block or pedestal covered with undecipherable characters.

H. P. Lovecraft wrote horror fiction in the 1920s and '30s. He was a recluse in Providence, RI -- a genius and an unrepentant racist and xenophobe. His legacy is controversial, leading to all sorts of questions about whether you can separate the work from the artist. How can a guy with such a unique and boundless imagination, also be so close-minded and bigoted when it came to the real world? After the break, I searching of answers, and find myself in some really weird places.

>> UNDERWRITING BREAK <<

EM: So when we first started talking you said you hadn't read any Lovecraft – he is someone who lived in a constant state of terror, did you think about these theories when reading him?

SS: Yes! Just haunting.

SS: My name is Sheldon Solomon. I'm an experimental social psychologist at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY.

SS: Yeah my thoughts are that it is very typical, I thought of Frankenstein and other grotesque creatures. The development of these kinds of creatures, imaginary or not, we call it terror focalization -- it gives us some concrete and embodied entity upon to project our death fears.

Sheldon Solomon led a group of psychologists who coined a term called Terror Management Theory, which help illuminate the paradox of Lovecraft.

Basically, we all know we're going to die. But if we were to focus on that reality, we wouldn't be able to function on a daily basis.

SS: Because any cultural construction of reality is sufficient to ward off all death anxiety.

And we are unique in the animal kingdom because no other creature can imagine its own death.

SS: All of those of those notions, would conspire to render our ancestors literally paralyzed with existential terror.

SS: We've done hundreds of experiments. Sometimes we bring people into the lab and we have them read things on computer and while they're going that, unbeknownst to them, we flash the word death so fast, 28 milliseconds, that you don't know you've seen anything.

Then they'll ask the judges to set bail for a fictional prostitute. The judges who were prompted to think about death set a bail that's five times higher. People reminded of death will become intolerant of other racial or religious groups -- they'll even agree with the proposition that we should bomb other countries.

They flipped the script and asked people whether they want to be famous or have a star named after them in the Milky Way. The group prompted by death images grasped at those ideas.

SS: You know, you may not be here forever and I may not be here forever but I'm comforted that some vestige of my existence will persist over time none the less, so perhaps in the form of having children, perhaps in the form of amassing great fortunes and spraying my name all over buildings, airplanes and casinos. It could be by producing a great work of art and science.

Or a podcast.

READING: There was a secret which even torture could not extract. Mankind was not absolutely alone among the conscious things of earth, for shapes came out of the dark to visit the faithful few. But these were not the Great Old Ones. No man had ever seen the Old Ones. The carven idol was great Cthulhu, but none might say whether or not the others were precisely like him. No one could read the old writing now, but things were told by word of mouth. The chanted ritual was not the secret—that was never spoken aloud, only whispered. The chant meant only this: "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming."

So I was in Red Hook, recently, which is an old industrial neighborhood on the edge of Brooklyn. The subways never ran there. The docks are rusting; the factories are decaying. It's got a spooky vibe. But like a lot of Brooklyn, it is gentrifying. There's actually an IKEA there now.

I was out there doing some recording and I came across this really weird shop called "Love Craft" – two separate words. They sell handmade merchandise of Cthulhu, the indifferent, aquatic monster that Lovecraft created. The store was filled with hats, t-shirts, mugs, slippers, Bobbleheads – all making that big, green, creature with floppy tentacles on his mouth and bat wings look sort of cute.

SFX: BELL RINGS OVER THE DOOR

I went inside to check it out.

EM: Okay, so, I need to get your levels tell me your name.

RS: Roberta.

EM: And your last name too?

RS: Suydam.

EM: Sudam?

RS: Yes, I'm Roberta Sudam.

EM:: How do you spell that?

RS: S-u-y-d-a-m. It's Dutch.

EM: Oh.

RS: I've been here for hundreds of years. My family has been in Brooklyn for hundreds of years.

EM: Oh, you're New York Dutch, cool.

RS: Yeah.

EM: Okay, the way that Lovecraft describes Cthulhu he's like this gross looking monster. He's got these tentacles on his face and bat wings and scaly, not scaly, aquatic and gigantic but everything is cute, hipster if you don't mind the word hipster, merch.

RS: Well, would you give a friend a t-shirt with a disgusting looking monster on it?

EM: Well, no.

RS: No, it's to honor it and to soothe ourselves, you know, soothing.

EM: (beat) But Cthulhu isn't real. Lovecraft invented him.

RS: Cthulhu is real. In fact, he's rising. It's here, in the waters.

(Awkward silence)

EM: Um ---

RS: Let me show you something.

SFX: MAC TURN-ON SOUND, CLICKS COMPUTER

RS: Okay -- here you go. This is the Far Rockaways.

EM: Okay, so that is a picture of I guess in water taken from boat, like a cell phone picture of some kind of hump, like it's the tip of a dome, like dark dome in the water. That could be, I don't know about anything I'm sure there's a very mundane explanation.

RS: Okay, Eric. It's -- *[beat]* Cthulhu is bigger than anything you can imagine. The universe, everything, the universe is going to expanding and it's going to turn into dust and we will go away with it. And they'll be no Shakespeare in a space capsule or something, no aliens are going to come down and find a toenail and clone us. That's it. We're done. Cthulhu is that knowledge. That's why you can't too close to him, because if you do, you' lose it. You know? *(beat)* that's all i'm saying, I'll be here. Until i'm not.

SFX: BELL RINGS OVER THE DOOR

RS: That's all I'm saying.

EM: I understand, um, thanks.

RS: Good luck to you, Eric. *(off mic)* Hi, can I help you?

I went online and I found out that Roberta Suydam isn't the only person selling Cthulhu merchandise. Some of them are doing it as a joke, but a lot of them are true believers just like her – using irony to control their fears. I started to wonder I was going crazy or they were. I even bought some binocular and brought them down to the Far Rockaways, to see if I could spot anything.

EM: Okay it's Sunday March 6, and I can't believe I'm at the beach because I'm freezing right now. I guess what I'm seeing it's kind of like a flat space where waves aren't there not rustling, flat and looks like black from here. But I mean that could be anything-- this is stupid I'm freezing.

READING: Cthulhu still lives, too, I suppose, again in that chasm of stone, which has shielded him since the sun was young. His accursed city is sunken once more, for the Vigilant sailed over the spot after the April storm; but his ministers on earth still bellow and prance and slay around idol-capped monoliths in lonely places. He must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or else the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men.

Eventually I contacted George Angell. He's a professor at Brown University, who curates H.P. Lovecraft's vault. We emailed back and forth. In fact, it felt like he was vetting me, which was weird, and insisted that I see him in person. I was heading up to Boston anyway, and Amtrak does go through Providence. So I figured, why not?

SFX: OPENING DOOR, WALKING THROUGH HALLWAY, BUZZ OF FLORESCENT LIGHTS.

GA: Sorry to make you walk all this way, it's just a bit longer.

SFX: PRESSES CODE ON DOOR -- UNLOCKS.

EM: Wow, I guess I should describe what's going on?

SFX: SNAPPING NITRILE GLOVES. DRAWER OPENS.

EM: I should describe what's going on. We're in an underground lab – deep underground. Professor Angell is opening a drawer and bringing out – is that a brain?! Is that a real brain?!

GA: Mm hmm.

EM: Oh my God, there's wires, and electrodes or something?

GA: That's right.

EM: Why? What is this?

GA: I figured you probably want to talk to the man himself. This is a brain-computer interface and text to speech software. And this is Howard.

EM: Howard Lovecraft?!

GA: That's right.

SFX: ELECTRICITY ZAPS. MACHINE SPINNING UP

GA: It doesn't take long for him to warm up.

HPL: *(Computerized voice – same actor from the readings)* Hello, Professor.

GA: Hello, Howard. We have a guest who would like to speak to you. This is Eric Molinsky.

HPL: Tell me this is the derivation of the name, Molinsky?

GA: Speak into the microphone. .

EM: This is amazing! Why doesn't the whole world know about this?!

GA: Well it's difficult, out of context, there are certain aspects of Howard's personality, deeply, imbedded into his brain, that are repugnant.

HPL: Professor?

GA: I've been worried that people would be offended, and the University would shut down my research.

HPL: Professor?

GA: But he's such a valuable resource. We can't keep him locked up forever.

HPL: I beg your pardon again what is the derivation of the name, Molinsky?

GA: Talk to Howard, he gets uncomfortable if he's on for too long.

EM: Okay where? Here

GA: Speak right into there.

EM: Hello, Howard?

HPL: Hello.

EM: Molinsky is is Ukrainian for Miller.

HPL: You are Aryan stock.

EM: No, I'm Jewish.

HPL: The Jews are humorless and emotionally overdeveloped ethical fanatics.

GA: You see what I mean, I'm so sorry.

EM: No, it's okay. I read about him, I know about --

HPL: The Judeo-feminization of the Aryan male has proven to be a mortal blow to our species.

EM: Wow.

GA: Yeah.

EM: Howard?

HPL: Yes?

EM: Was it your plan to live on.... like this?

HPL: Except for the wires in my cerebellum partly. I spent many years contemplating the unimaginative horror of death -- a blackness beyond all human

conception. I had become a quivering neurotic until I began to imagine eternal life without the burden of rotting muscles, bones and flesh.

GA: So you see it is Howard....

EM: But what does he know about the world, does he know how society has changed?

HPL: Professor Angell has informed me about the opiates of your time. Tele-Vision. The socialization of media. Why do you think people distract themselves until they have neither the focus nor concentration to see the horror waiting for them? Civilization is but a slight coverlet beneath which the dominant beast sleeps lightly and ever ready to awake. As the warm ocean rise and rise until they swallow up the great energy expanding cities of the world, Cthulhu is rising with it.

EM: You didn't invent Cthulhu? He's real?

GA: Alright Howard, I think we're done for now, thank you.

EM: No, no, I just started talking to him!

HPL: Shudder, companion of night, anomalous horror, baying of dogs, forbidden dimension

GA: He just degrades form here, breaks down in fragments.

EM: But I want to ask him about Terror Management Theory.

HPL: Evil has power to mold.

SFX: UNPLUGS MACHINE.

When I got to my parents' house that night, I had insane nightmares, and I kept waking up in a cold sweat. When I got back to New York, I couldn't stop thinking what might be off the edge of Long Island. So I rented a boat and headed towards that dome in the water.

SFX: ROWING ON WATER.

EM: Oh my God, it's windy, it's really windy. I'm in this no man's land between New York and Jersey. I think I see something now, I'm drifting towards. It's sort of a dome, it's a big dome, it's grayish green. like a dome. I'm getting a weird feedback on my recorder. *[SFX: EERIE STATIC INTERFERENCE ON THE MIC -- RAISE VOICE TO COUNTER THE STATIC/INCREASED LEVEL OF AMBI]* I feel cold. I feel like we live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. *[FORCED HAPPINESS IN VOICE]* No, no. People are doing this now, where they're sending phones into space, I've seen the videos online they always come back down but they don't have to, the phone can keep drifting and drifting and an alien spacecraft and they could bring it to a parallel universe, or a baby universe and my voice could live on, my voice could live on forever! *[SFX: STATIC FADES AWAY]* Where the hell am I?

SFX: BOAT BANGS AGAINST ROCK RECORDER DROPS FROM HAND.

EM: Ow!

I don't remember rowing back to shore. I didn't even row back to Coney Island. I rowed all the way back to Red Hook – just a few blocks away from Roberta's store, Love Craft.

SFX: BELL JINGLES WITH DOOR.

RS: You're back?

EM: Hi yeah,

RS: How can I help you?

EM: Could you open the display case? I want to buy some merch.

**** ALT TAKE: That night, I had this really intense dream. I took a boat out into the harbor and rowed towards the spot where Cthulhu was supposed to be. And I saw the top of a dome peeking out of the waves. Suddenly, I felt overcome with fear, like I was doing something forbidden. And then I flew into space and threw my phone out there, which had my voice on it. And it drifted and drifted until it slipped through a wormhole into a pocket**

universe. Then all of reality disappeared in a flash but I knew my phone was protected. I woke up feeling weirdly happy. And when I got back to Brooklyn, I bought a Cthulhu t-shirt. And a BobbleHead.

MUSIC BREAK

If you go to Red Hook looking for the store Love Craft, you're out of luck. It doesn't exist. But Cthulhu merchandise is very real -- and just a few clicks away.

Roberta Suydam was played by Ann Scobie (SCO-bee), Professor Angell was played by Dan Truman, and Bill Lobely (LOBE-lee) was the voice of H.P. Lovecraft.

Special thanks to Sheldon Solomon – who is very real – as is his work on Terror Management Theory.

This episode was written and produced by me, Jeff Emtman and Bethany Denton of the podcast Here Be Monsters from KCRW's Independent Producer Project.

Next time, I'm going to stay with the theme of monsters – but this one is more about childhood nostalgia than existential terror.

You can like Imaginary Worlds on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginaryworldspodcast.org.